


KINGSLEY AMIS

THE ANTI-DEATH LEAGUE



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Part One

A GIRL and an older woman were walking along a metaled pathway. To their left, beyond a strip of grass, was the front of a large high building in grey stone. Reaching its corner, at which there was a pointed turret, brought them a view of a square of grass on which stood a tower-like structure supported by stone pillars. The afternoon sun was shining brightly and the space under the main part of the tower was in deep shadow.

The girl halted. "What's happening?" she asked.

"That's just the old cat," said the other. "He's spotted something under the tower there, I expect."

A small black cat, crouching quite still, faced the shadow. After a moment, a bird with tapering wings flew out, dipped towards the cat, gave two brief twitters and wheeled back to where it had come from. The girl went on watching.

"Oh, you know what that is," said the older woman. "She'll have got a nest under there, the bird, and she's trying to keep the cat away from it. Trying to give him a scare, you see."

As she spoke, three uniformed men came into sight round the corner of the block beyond the tower and walked along the path towards the women. At the same time, a large aircraft, flying low, moved into earshot.

The bird made its circuit exactly as before. "Why doesn't he move?" asked the girl. "Can't he see the bird?"

"Oh, you bet he can. He's not missing anything, that old cat. He's got his eye on her all right. But he's not going to move and give the game away. Now we'll just watch them the once more and then we'll be getting on, shall we?"

The three in uniform came up. One of them, a tall fair-complexioned young man, slowed in his walk and stopped. "Look at this," he said. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Like what?" asked the older of the two with him.

"That tower."

"Just a water-tower they thought they might as well do in the same style. A bit sinister, I agree."

The sound of the aircraft grew in volume sharply. The cat ran off towards a tree growing beside the path. Just when the girl turned and looked at the tall young man it was as if the sun went out for an instant. He flinched and drew in his breath almost with a cry.

"God, did you feel that?"

"I'll say I did. I thought I'd had a stroke or something."

"It was like the passing of the shadow of death," said the third man.

"But what it really was was the passing of the shadow of a passenger aircraft. Look, it'll cross that slope in a second. There."

"Thank Christ for that," said the tall young man. "I really felt like, you know, a fly when the swatter comes down. Gave me quite a turn."

He looked again at the girl, who was not looking at him. The older woman, however, was, and unamiably.

"Come along, Mrs. Casement," she said with an abruptness she had not shown earlier. "We haven't got all night, dear. You're not the only one, you know."

The two groups diverged.

"I never took our James for a student of architecture, did you, Moti?" asked the senior of the three officers, a gaunt man wearing a major's crown and a clergyman's collar and silk.

"Ah, there you have his well-known subtlety, padre. He was really admiring something far more worth a young man's while than cold stones, am I right, James?"

"Well, yes. I thought she was wonderful, didn't you? Extraordinary eyes. But sort of blank and frightened."

"Probably the shadow of that plane," said the clergyman. "It is scaring if you don't know what it is. It even got me until I remembered. I was quite used to it at one time."

"I should have said she was frightened already. But then who wouldn't be in a bloody place like this?"

The clergyman frowned. "It's got a pretty good reputation. I'm sure they all do what they can."

"By putting up this sort of thing, for instance?"

The pathway had broadened to a circle. In the middle was an ornamental pond, its stonework discolored and scabbed with moss, and in the center of this a plinth on which crouched a stone creature somewhat resembling a lion. Each of its claws became a thin stem ending in a flower shaped like a flattened bell, from which in turn protruded a kind of tongue with three points. The thin tail appeared to have been broken off short and the break filed smooth. From the smiling mouth there curled upwards a triple tongue with a small object, not certainly identifiable, at each point. Every inch of the surface had at one time been enameled with minute designs, but these were largely weathered away.

"A nice welcoming sort of chap to run into on your way in here," said the young man addressed as James. "I dreamt about him the other night."

"Good for you." The clergyman took him by the arm and drew him off towards a flight of stone steps that led up to the entrance of the building. "Is there anything like that in your part of the world, Moti?"

"Not that I know of? I'm thankful to say. We're a pretty morbid lot in our own fashion, but rather more direct. We leave that kind of thing to our yellow brethren. In fact I seem to remember seeing a photo of a gentleman somewhat resembling our friend, though minus the horticulture, standing in a palace at Peking or one of those places. An interesting sidelight."

They reached a paneled vestibule with notices on every hand, some pinned to the woodwork, others on small stands. Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition All This Month in Lecture-Room B, said one. Coach Excursion to St. Jerome's Priory: Names to Office by Friday Please, said another.

"What used to be at the end of his tail, do you think?"

The clergyman glared. "Come off it, James, for heaven's sake. What's the matter with you today? I could give you my theory about that, and back it up, but it wouldn't go too well with my cloth. And what do you care?"

"Oh, the respected cloth."

"Yes, the respected cloth. I know it's a bit threadbare in places, but it's all I've got. Now chin in, shoulders back, arms swung as high as the waist-belt to front and rear and get set to cheer him up. That reminds me-give me that cake."

A small parcel was passed from hand to hand as they walked down the dip of a corridor that rose again out of sight.

"Intimations of infinity," said the officer called Moti, taking in this effect. "Highly therapeutic."

"Oh, look at this," said the clergyman after a moment. "The Army's here. I detect the hand of Captain Leonard. Applied, as you might expect, a little late in the day."

They approached a recessed double door outside which a young NCO was rising to his feet from a folding chair. Before him was a card-table on which lay an open foolscap notebook and a couple of technical manuals.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said, coming smartly to attention. "You wish to visit Captain Hunter, I take it?"

"Yes, if the Army Council has no objection. What the devil are you doing here? I mean it's nice to see you, Fawkes, but what are you in aid of?"

The NCO grinned. "Security, Major Ayscue."

"I thought it might be that. Captain Leonard's inspiration?"

"His orders, sir. Everybody who comes and goes has to have his or her full name written down here, ~~plus the time he or she came and went. Very vital information, those times. Captain Leonard was most insistent about them. Oh, and it might interest you to know, sir, that all visitors have got to go down in the book whether it's Captain Hunter they've come to see or not. You never know whether a North Korean mightn't worm himself in with a tape-recorder, you see.~~"

"There wasn't anyone here when I came last week."

"No doubt, Mr. Churchill, but that was last week. And this week we're making a special effort, because Captain Hunter might be coming out in a few days and we're only on the second page of the book. Now let's see"-he began writing-"Fifteen forty-four hours... Major... Ayscue... Captain... Naidu..."

"Is it all right for us to go in now, Fawkes?" asked Ayscue.

"Oh, I think so, sir. Captain Leonard did tell me not to let anyone by until I'd written them down, but I think, I can hold Mr. Churchill's name in my head for a few more seconds. You'll find Captain Hunter very cheerful, by the way. Quite his old self."

"Thank you, Corporal Fawkes," said Naidu. "I take it I shan't be required to furnish a photostat of my commission to the Minister of Defence?"

"No, sir. Captain Leonard didn't say anything about that."

The three officers entered a long airy room with sunlight beating through the windows. More light was reflected from the glossy walls and from the glass of the many pictures hanging on these. Down the middle ran a trestle table that bore dozens of vases of flowers and plants in pots. Thick streamers of greenery curled down from wire baskets attached to the ceiling.

A figure sitting up in bed at the far end of the room raised an arm and the visitors approached. On either side, also in bed, were men reading, men apparently asleep, men lying down but not asleep. One man was looking carefully round the room, as if for the first time, while another man in white trousers and T shirt watched him as carefully from a nearby chair. Yet another man, with irregular patches of grey hair on a grey scalp, got up from a bench by the window and moved away, keeping track of the arrivals out of the corner of his eye.

The man who was putting the Army to so much trouble seemed very much at home. He was lying back against advantageously arranged pillows within reach of various comforts: non-glossy illustrated magazines, paperback novels on the covers of which well-developed girls cringed or sneered, a comparatively hard-back work on how to win at poker, a couple of newspapers folded so as to reveal half-completed crossword puzzles, a tin jug containing a cloudy greyish fluid, packets of French cigarettes and an open box of chocolates. Captain Hunter, a thin pale man of twenty-eight with a thin black mustache, smiled and extended his hand.

"Hullo, boys," he said, and offered cigarettes which Ayscue and Churchill accepted. "I'm afraid I can't give you a light. You're not allowed to have matches and stuff in here because you might

start burning the place down. Almost certainly would, in fact. Oh, thank you, James. Is that parcel for me? What's in it?"

"A cake," said Ayscue. "But don't go cutting it now."

"My dear Willie, I couldn't if I wanted to. No knives, like no matches. But the nice nurse come on at six and he might see his way to lending me one."

"Well, mind he isn't about when you start slicing."

"What...? I suppose there's a file and a rope-ladder in it."

"Not exactly." Naidu spoke with some disapproval. "A different mode of escape."

"You don't mean..."

"Yes," said Churchill. "Three quarter-bottles of White Horse. Corporal Beavis baked the thing up in the Mess kitchen. Sorry we couldn't get any more in."

"Quite enough for a man in my condition. Thank you all most awfully."

"How is your condition, Max?" asked Ayscue.

"Oh, splendid. Dr. Best is very pleased with me. He says he's been able to explain to me just why I got myself into the state I did and so I shouldn't have any more trouble. He's letting me out on proba-tion next Wednesday."

Churchill said diffidently, "What was the explanation he gave you? If you want to talk about it of course."

"I haven't the remotest notion, dear boy. I'm only telling you what he says he's done. He likes doing all the talking himself. It must come from being supposed to ask so many questions. I just let him get on with it."

"It's bound to be a difficult task, giving it up," said Naidu. "But you can rely on us three to give you all the support and encouragement in the world."

"Whatever is possessing you, Moti? Nobody said anything about giving it up. Any fool can give it up. I'm going to do something much more worthwhile than that-ditching alcoholism and taking up very heavy drinking. Talking of drinking, I'll have to watch that Scotch. Too much at one go and I'll start acting sober, and that'd be suspicious. You see, these pills they give you, when they really get hold of you you start acting pissed all the time. That's how they know when you're taking a turn for the better."

"You're not acting pissed," said Churchill.

"I'd like to think I've always known how to hold my liquor."

"You weren't holding it too well the night we brought you here."

"No gentleman can or should be always a gentleman. Some get more ungentlemanly than others, though. You see that white-haired old buffer down by the door? Last Saturday he was let out on a week's probation. Very early indeed on Tuesday morning they carted him back in, pissed. The 'they' included a small detachment of police as well as a crying wife. There was no end of a to-do, I can assure you. I haven't heard such language since that last Sergeants' Mess party. At lunchtime today he fell out of bed. What do you think of that? Just try to imagine how he must have attacked the stuff to be still pissed after four and a half days. And he only had two days and a bit to fill his tanks. You know, I can't help finding that rather disturbing? It seems to flout some basic law. Oh, if you can't manage another cake by say Monday, do you think you could send me a book about drinks, cocktail recipes or what-not? There's a lot to be said for pornography in the absence of the real thing. Ask anybody."

"You'd better be careful with those empties," said Ayscue.

"Oh, no problem. I shall just heave them out of the loo window. There's a sort of cairn of broken bottles in the bushes by that corner. I found it on one of my rambles through the extensive grounds when, disinclined to trudge all the way back indoors for the purpose, I was looking for a place to pee. That wasn't all I found, either. In a brief circuit of fifty yards or so I came across no fewer than three very amorous couples, and that was without trying to come across them. Quite the contrary. I was virtually threading my way. I get the impression everybody's at it all the time. It's no more than you'd expect in an environment like this."

Churchill ground out his cigarette. "Not everybody, surely."

"I was speaking figuratively. Not everybody, no. I question whether the catatonics do much in that way, and no doubt the senility wards have a stainless record. Dr. Best took me round them the other afternoon. Nothing personal about it-it's a standard trip, all part of the service. I was expecting him to take the opportunity to deliver a little lecture on the perils of self-abuse, but for once he let things speak for themselves."

When none of the other three said anything, Hunter went on, "I had our old buddy Brian Leonard round here a couple of days ago. He'd really come to keep Fawkes up to the mark, he told me, but having come so far he saw nothing against walking the few extra yards to my bedside. He wasn't entirely happy, he said. He seemed to think that a dipsomaniac in charge of the administration of a secret-weapons training unit represented some kind of danger to security. I did what I could to reassure him. I pointed out that if the worst threat of that sort came from the odd dipsomaniac then he hadn't much to worry about. He agreed with that, and said that anyway he was satisfied I didn't know enough to be a menace."

Naidu had thrown off the slight uneasiness he had been betraying in the previous few minutes. "If that is so," he said accusingly, "how does brother Leonard justify this quite ridiculous fandango with the unfortunate Corporal Fawkes at the door like the recording angel?"

Hunter did his silent laugh. "We went into that. He was very man-to-man about it-I've never

felt so close to him before. He was sure I'd agree that one had to go through the motions in matters of this sort. He never knew when his master in Whitehall mightn't want to know what was being done to stop this dipso admin officer's mouth, in the talking sense, that is, and the Fawkes arrangement would cover him. I asked him whether in that case a sentry in radiation battle order mightn't be even more impressive, and he said he could tell I was joking and clapped me on the back and we had a jolly good laugh together. You know, I must introduce Brian to Dr Best one of these days. They'd get on like a house on fire."

"Did Leonard say anything about this spy idea of his?" asked Naidu.

"Only that he was more convinced than ever that there was one, at least one, somewhere in the unit. In fact he said he now had positive proof-he wouldn't tell me what sort. But he still had very little idea of who the spy might be, except that he'd now more or less ruled out the high-security people, plus me and the Colonel and you, Willie. I put it to him that any proof of a thing like there being a spy in a place ought to throw a good deal of light on who the spy was or else it was pretty odd sort of proof. He turned all bland and mysterious and said yes, it was."

"Very helpful indeed." Naidu stood with his hands behind his back, evidently pondering. "Did he voice any particular suspicions?"

"Not really. All these Indians and Pakistanis coming into the unit made his job frightfully tricky-I'm just telling you what he told me, Moti. He saw that they had to come, but he wasn't happy about the efficiency of their Governments' screening systems. His master in Whitehall is going to have a word with someone about it."

After more thought, Naidu said, "He seems most curiously ready to discuss the problem, even he doesn't give much away. I ask myself why this should be. Would it not seem that a prerequisite of catching a spy would be to avoid putting him on his guard by letting it be known that his presence is suspected?"

"I asked him that very question. Apparently what's called the philosophy of phylactology-spy-catching to you-has been transformed. Keeping dead mum until the final pounce is old hat now. You go round saying how near you're getting and wait for somebody along the line to get anxious enough to show a break in their behavior-pattern. The new method works better except with very brave spies and there are figures to prove that only nine per cent or something are that. Anyway no more about Security. It's a subject for fools and madmen, as my chat with Brian Leonard might well suggest to you. But like everything else it has its compensations. One or two of Fawkes's mates have turned up to see him when they're off duty and they tend to look in on me as well. Somebody called Signalman Pearce, who works on the camp telephone exchange, appeared this very morning and discussed jazz and popular music with me for over half an hour. A most charming lad. Which somehow reminds me to tell you the only really interesting thing Dr Best had to say about my difficulties. According to him I'm probably a repressed homosexual."

All four men burst into laughter.

"These repressed lesbian tendencies of yours," said Dr. Best, smiling. "If it's all right with you ~~want to go into them rather more deeply than we had time for last week. Do you agree that we should?~~"

"Yes," said Catharine. "If you want to."

"It isn't what I want, Mrs. Casement, it's what you want. And I ask you whether you want to because, as I've warned you several times before, whenever we go down at all deep we're virtually certain to find something rather unpleasant waiting for us. Do you follow? Something that must be pretty shocking or it wouldn't be hiding away from us like that."

"Just carry on, doctor. Another shock or two won't make much odds to me."

Dr. Best chuckled and shook his head in a kind of admiration. "You're incorrigible, Mrs. Casement. The very first time you were able to talk to me intelligibly, just after Christmas, you made exactly the same point, and I told you then what I see I must tell you again now, that a mere unpleasant experience, however much it may happen to distress you, does not in itself constitute a shock in the scientific, psychoanalytic sense. Let me tell you a couple of typical stories, both relating to patients that have been through my hands in the past year, which I hope will make the distinction clear to you."

The doctor's manner became even more relaxed than hitherto, if that were possible, and there was a note of affectionate reminiscence in his voice when he continued, "A little girl, ten years of age, is going home from school through a public park. It's a winter evening and dusk is falling, but it isn't dark yet, the park is only a few hundred yards across, and at this time there are usually plenty of people about-but not, unfortunately, on the evening in question. A man springs out on her, drags her into the bushes and rapes her, very thoroughly. After a time she makes her way home and is naturally taken to hospital.

"Today that child is happily watching television and playing her gramophone records just as before. Even her work at school has shown no significant decline in quality. It's true that there are gynecological complications which may affect her ovulatory capacity, but emotionally and mentally she's quite untouched. What happened to her, you see, was an unpleasant experience.

"The picture's very different I'm sorry to say, with the second case. Here we have a young man of twenty-five-which leads me to make an important secondary point. I say 'a young man of twenty-five' because this is how we customarily refer to persons of that age-group. But in psychoanalytic terms that man is no longer young. This is very far from being a technical quibble, Mrs. Casement. All our experience shows that the psychoanalytically young are far better equipped to resist both unpleasant experiences-as we saw with the little girl-and shocks in comparison with, let's say, the psychoanalytically non-young. Of which group you yourself are a member. (Indeed, at thirty-two you are hardly young in any sense.) I mention this distinction by way of reinforcing my warning to you about the dangers of beginning to go down deep.

"But to resume my story. Our young man, or man, was in the cinema one evening when the man in the next seat made a sexual assault on him. This probably amounted to no more than a hand

laid on the knee or thigh. We can virtually rule out the idea of any genital contact, even through clothing. But I suppose we can never be quite sure, because... Because that young man, after a short period of violent mania, is now in a state of deep and perhaps irreversible depressive withdrawal. He, you see, had had a shock, the shock, I have no doubt, of finding that something buried in him was deeply responsive to the assault. The sudden flash of insight into his own unconscious homosexual tendencies was too much for his sanity. Which brings us, Mrs. Casement, to the point we reached five minutes ago."

Catharine had started trying not to listen as soon as she realized the sort of thing that was going to happen to the child in Dr. Best's first story, but she had to go on looking at him, because whenever you looked away from him he stopped talking, waited for you to look at him again and went back to the beginning of his last sentence but one. Going on looking at him made it harder not to listen to him, and it was not until she had heard what happened in the park that she was able to push the meaning out of his voice by hearing it as a flow of little cries and moans separated by puffs and clicks.

To keep this going, she had to push the meaning out of the doctor's face in the same sort of way. At the start, it was more of a face than most people's: a glossy pink bald crown with a patch of thick curly hair above each ear, wide and shining blue eyes, a nose that seemed too big for its nostrils, a band of broken veins across each cheekbone, lips of which only the lower one did any work, a bottom row of narrow black-edged teeth. As she concentrated on it, all this turned into shapes and colors, some parts moving, others not, as important and as unimportant as the white and pale greens and lines and corners that were the papers on the desk, the dark greens and ovals and pinks of the flowers, the rectangles and dark blues and dark reds along the wall, or best of all the bands of light and shade everywhere. This was the method of dealing with things that she had learned very quickly six months earlier, just after finding out that there was nothing about her life that she liked.

Making it so that either everything she saw and heard was important, or nothing but unimportant things were anywhere, had helped a lot at first. But as soon as she was really good at it, and could keep it up most of the day, she had begun having trouble with sizes and distance. It was about that time that her sister and brother-in-law had got Dr. Best to look after her.

The trouble began again now. What was the doctor's face must be an ordinary size and an ordinary distance away. But, as she looked at it, it suddenly grew and receded at the same time, so that very soon it was, or seemed as if it was, yards across and yards and yards away, like a mountain miles off, a cloud in the sky. Then, with an invisible flick that she always expected but could never time, it was very small and near, the size of a penny at arm's length, a pinhead so close that she would brush it with her eyelash if she blinked.

Hardly frightened at all, Catharine said to herself, meaning it very sincerely, that what she was looking at was Dr. Best's face, attached to the rest of him behind the desk in his office, surrounded by papers and all those flowers and the books, with bars of sunlight from the Venetian blind falling on the walls and floor and furniture. And after only a few seconds everything was back as it should have been. Now she knew she was getting better.

Just then the doctor stopped talking. She felt so cheerful that she smiled at him and asked casually, "What happened to the man? Did they catch him?"

"What man?"

"The man in the park. The one that raped the little girl."

He clicked his tongue, thrusting out his lower lip. "I don't know- that's none of my concern. Really, Mrs. Casement, I do beg you most seriously not to identify yourself with other victim-figures in this way. It's childish, childish in the technical psychoanalytic sense as well as the semantic."

"I was only asking. I wasn't identifying. I wasn't raped."

"No no no, I meant... Let it pass, let it pass. We've wasted quite enough time already. Now. You agree you've been warned that investigating your lesbian tendencies may lead to your suffering shock?"

"If you like to put that in writing I'll sign it."

"That won't be necessary. Your oral consent is sufficient. Very well. You appreciate that unless you answer my questions fully and to the best of your knowledge and ability honestly there is no point in my putting them to you?"

"Yes, all right."

"Good. Now just running over what you told me last time... You've never taken part in any overt sexual activity with another member of your sex, never so much as embraced passionately with another girl or woman, never made a sexual approach to one or had one made to you by one, never entertained any romantic sentiment towards one. Do you agree?"

"Agree? Of course I agree. It's what I said myself, isn't it?"

"I merely wondered if you'd had any second thoughts on the matter. I'm particularly interested in your friendship with this... Lady Hazell. Would you care to tell me something about that?"

"It's just a friendship, doctor. There are such things, you know. Lucy is a widow and very rich and I met her through my first husband. When I left my second husband she said I could come and stay with her until I got myself sorted out. Only as you know I didn't get myself sorted out. But I must have told you this when I first came here."

"In a rather different way. Do go on."

"Well, that's all there is. She's been very kind to me and she makes me laugh and I'm fond of her."

"What does she think of you?"

"I don't know. I suppose she's sorry for me. I suppose she likes me."

"Is she ever... physically affectionate, does she put her arm round you, hug you and the like? For instance, does she ever dance with you?"

Catharine laughed heartily. "Dance with me? No. She doesn't ever dance with me. She's got quite enough male dancing partners."

"So I confess I rather assumed," said the doctor, hissing slightly. "Oh yes, she came to see me after visiting you last week. Without an appointment, I may say. In fact she didn't even knock at that door. Fortunately I was disengaged. She said I wasn't giving you the right treatment and became abusive on the point."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Best. I didn't know she was going to do that."

He gave a brief snorting laugh, probably to show how trifling had been the effect upon him of Lady Hazell's intrusion. "Yes. She runs a sort of permanent salon for young men, doesn't she, at that grand house of hers? Officers from the camp and such? Parties and the rest of it till all hours?"

"She gives parties, yes."

"A curious environment, it must have been, for a woman undergoing a breakdown. Did you join in the parties when you were there?"

"I just gave people drinks sometimes."

Dr. Best said suddenly, "A very attractive person, I mean physically, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, clearly. But if you mean have I ever wanted to go to bed with her the answer's no."

"Living in that house you must often have seen her naked or semi-naked, in the bathroom and the bedroom and elsewhere. Have you ever experienced sexual excitement at such times?"

"No."

"You haven't been aware of your nipples hardening or any genital phenomena?"

"Christ, certainly not. I told you I get little enough of that with men."

"We'll come to that later. Meanwhile I can't help being struck by the extreme emphasis of your denial, Mrs. Casement. Over-stressed reactions to such inquiries always tend to suggest that the subject is concealing an opposite reaction. So please think carefully. You have never in any way been sexually attracted towards Lady Hazell or any other girl or woman as far as you are aware is that correct?"

"Yes," said Catharine in a tone heavy with moderation.

At this assurance Dr. Best's cordiality, which had been falling off ever since he ended his pair of anecdotes, vanished altogether. He curled his lower lip over his upper one, then drew it away with a plop. "It's clear that these tendencies of yours are buried more deeply than I suspected. We must try another line of attack."

"May I ask a question?"

He sniffed and shrugged. "If you wish."

"I know I'm very ignorant about all this, but me not ever feeling attracted to girls, mightn't that just mean I wasn't attracted to them? I don't see how-

The doctor's good will was immediately restored. "As you say, you're ignorant. That's natural enough. But there's nothing mysterious about this. Tell me. What do you think is the reason for your prolonged history of... let's call it failure with men?"

"Well, I suppose some of it's bad luck."

"There's no such thing as luck in this field, I'm afraid. What else?"

"I told you I sometimes feel a bit afraid of them. There was that man early on who pulled the knife on me, you remember."

"Yes, very good, that's certainly relevant, though its real meaning is rather different from the one you appear to attribute to it. You'll agree that threatening somebody with a lethal weapon is a manifestation of aggression? Yes, now what's the most probable exterior cause of aggression, not coming from inside the person who becomes aggressive but from outside?"

"Something you don't like?"

"Very nearly. Something that doesn't like you. Somebody else's aggression. Do you follow?"

Catharine considered. "You mean I didn't like him? But I spent all my time thinking how nice he was. I wanted to-

"That was what you thought consciously, Mrs. Casement. All this is buried very deep, you know. Just look at your sexual career. Over the last months I've accumulated something like thirty pages of notes on it. And what does it amount to?" The doctor picked up the file in front of him and threw it a few inches farther away on his desk, then, slowly folding his hands, laid them on his crossed legs. "Nothing very hard to interpret. Two broken marriages. Literally dozens of affairs, starting at an unusually-

"They weren't what you could call affairs, most of them, they didn't last any time at all. I kept wanting them to last when they started, but they kept going wrong and I couldn't make them last."

"Because of your deep... unconscious... aggression... towards... men. Oh, it's a familiar

pattern. You betray unconscious hostility, the man unconsciously senses it and begins to react overtly, you retreat, he responds to the primitive flight-situation with more hostility and so on. All of which increases your latent hostility yet further and makes the next failure that much more inevitable. Your course was set a long time ago. Originally, probably, your attitude to your father was what-

"I loved my father."

"No doubt, no doubt. I'm not a Freudian, so we can safely leave all that on one side. I'm not interested in the semi-mystical origins of mental disease. I'm a doctor, not a theologian." Dr. Best ran his tongue to and fro behind his lower lip. "Anyway, in case you're still unconvinced, let me if I may draw attention to your physical type. Your shape, Mrs. Casement. Would you mind standing up for a moment? Thank you. Oh yes. Oh yes, it's all there. Tall... shoulders tending to be broad... small breasts... rather narrow hips... long legs. Turn round, would you? Quite so. You can sit down now. Quite typical semi-androgynous characteristics. You belong to-

"I know, that means man-plus-woman, doesn't it? Well, if you think I'm not properly a woman or something you're wrong. All my men, all the men I've ever had anything to do with, were always complaining about the very opposite. I couldn't do a thing without them all saying it was just like a woman. Bloody woman. Pull yourself together and stop acting like a bloody woman. And there was nothing wrong with my shape according to them. Whenever they weren't angry with me they were always going on about my shape, all of them. And my face. If you think I've got a face like a man all I can say is you've seen some pretty queer men."

"Oh, I have, Mrs. Casement, I have." Dr. Best seemed delighted. "Some very queer men indeed. Including a number who were unaware of their condition until I pointed it out to them. Why, only yesterday I was talking to a young fellow under treatment here for alcoholism, an Army officer from the camp. Well educated, highly intelligent, you'd have said quite worldly and sophisticated. And yet when I suggested what was patently obvious, that he was drinking himself to death in order to conceal from himself his unconscious homosexual tendencies, he told me with evident sincerity that the idea had never crossed his mind. He meant his conscious mind, of course. In his case there was the fact that his appearance and demeanor and so on were those of a normal male, which in his uninstructed way he seemed to take as some sort of evidence of his basic heterosexuality. I lost no time in exposing the fallaciousness of that view.

"Yes yes yes," the doctor went on with momentary petulance, perhaps repressing a negative reaction from the depths of his unconscious, "the world is full of male counterparts of yourself, Mrs. Casement. Undoubtedly the men you attract are of this type. The self-hatred engendered by their hidden recognition of this is what leads them to react so aggressively to your own aggressions. It's hardly surprising that the outcome should be unfortunate on both sides. Such men would do well to recognize their homosexual psyche and set about coming to terms with it, as I told our young friend."

Dr. Best gave a bright nod by way of conclusion and reached for a vase of wallflowers, the scent of which he inhaled with a clear nasal whistle.

Catharine said, "You're advising me to start sleeping with women, are you?"

"My dear Mrs. Casement, men in my position never advise anything, any more than we condemn anything. All we try to do is explain. And the explanation I offer you is that all your difficulties spring from an unconscious preference for your own sex. In other words, you are a lesbian."

He put so much into this last sentence that Catharine tried quite hard to respond with appropriate indignation or concern. But perhaps she had taken too much to heart his repeated warnings against giving him the kind of answer she thought would please him. Anyhow, the best she could do was to ask in an interested tone, "Do you really think so?"

The doctor put the flowers down firmly but quietly. More thoroughly than before, he searched his mouth with his tongue. "You seem unaware of the seriousness of your position. You became patient in a lunatic asylum because you went mad, I've never gone in for sentimental euphemisms about mental hospitals and psychologically disturbed and the rest of it and I'm not going to start on your account. One of the marks of your condition is a fear of insight, understandable enough in view of what that insight would entail. But what I find far less... explicable is your obstinacy. An individual personality defect. You are of your own free will resisting that recognition of the truth, that shock which alone will enable you to undergo what's known as a psychic shift and reveal the true nature of your disorder. Very evidently, nothing I can do here will bring that about. Very well then. We'll see how you get on in a rather less cozy and warm and safe environment. I've feather-bedded you against reality for too long."

He reached for a pad of pink paper and began writing on it, his head swaying like a violinist's.

"What are you going to do with me?"

When he had finished writing, the doctor said, "I'm putting you out on probation, Mrs. Casement. For twenty-eight days in the first instance. You leave this asylum next Wednesday. That will give you time to make arrangements."

He had, at last, succeeded in disconcerting her. Without any effort on her part, a sense of what it was like outside came upon her: railway stations, drinks, shopping, laughter, traffic, telephones, men. Catharine hugged her hands between her knees. "Where shall I live? What am I going to do?"

"Your room at Lady Hazell's establishment is ready for you any time you care to go there. She was most definite on that point. I gather you're not in any financial difficulties. So you should manage perfectly well."

Dr. Best prodded a bell-push on his desk, smiled distantly and went on, "You'll be back where you started from. The results of this little experiment should be interesting. To both of us."

"We'll give it to you in the arm today, Maxie, as a special concession," said the nurse. "Seeing as how there are gentlemen present."

"We'd better be getting along," said Ayscue.

"This is the main event of the afternoon," said Hunter, unbuttoning his pajama jacket. "It would be insensitive of you to go now." He swallowed quickly twice and licked his lips.

Churchill, about to follow Ayscue's lead, noticed this. He fancied too that a couple of paler patches had appeared on Hunter's pale face. "It'll do us good to watch-might make us go a bit steadier with the pink gins tonight. What are you getting?"

"Little multi-vitamin shot," answered the nurse, a muscular man in his thirties with one of the smallest noses Churchill had ever seen. "All our thirsty friends start missing out on their carrot and liver after a bit. This will make our Maxie a healthy boy as well as a good boy."

The nurse had placed a round metal tray at the foot of the bed. He took from it a small glass phial with a narrow neck which he nipped with a pincer-like instrument. Next he carefully filled a syringe with the dark amber-colored liquid in the phial and then picked up an antiseptic pad.

"Is this all he gets?" asked Churchill, meaning only to break the silence as the man worked.

"Oh no, soldier." The nurse began swabbing a patch of skin on the inside of Hunter's upper arm. "There's the little blue sausages that make Maxie go bye-byes, and the weeny round orange jokers that cheer him up when he's feeling sad. Right. Now just relax, will you? Relaxie, Maxie. Good..."

"Incredible taste you get at the back of your throat with these vitamin shots," said Hunter, looking past them at the wall. "I don't think I shall ever be able to drink barley water with the same relish after this. Not that it does much to take the taste away. I think perhaps... a couple of nice solid sandpaper sandwiches might help. But they don't provide those here."

"Good boy, Maxie." The nurse patted Hunter lightly on the top of the head. "You'll be able to see in the dark now. Just what you could do with, eh? You know, you blokes don't want to take your old pal's troubles too seriously. He's just a bit of a boozier, is our Maxie. Nothing compared to some we got here."

He took a cigarette from Hunter's bedside table, lit it with a lighter from a pocket in his white knee-length coat, blew out a shred of tobacco and continued to talk, slowly stroking his forehead with the fingers of the hand that held the cigarette.

"That geezer over there, now. Fellow with my colleague in attendance." Although the nurse did not drop his voice at all, the man who had been carefully examining the room went on doing so without any sign of having heard. "Keen as mustard. In love with the stuff. This conditioned-reflex treatment, now that's no buggy-ride, I can tell you. It's this idea where they start off by giving you a bomb that makes you throw up. Strychnine was what they used to use, but as the years rolled by they got to notice that it had, uh, undesirable side-effects. You know, like death." The nurse gave a long chuckle, bowing deeply once like an actor taking a curtain call. "All that's been ironed out. Anyway, you know the form, I dare say: fill him full of emetine hydrochloride and the rest of it and let the old tachycardia and sweating and vertigo soften him up a bit. Then

the technique is to slip him a glass of Scotch or whatever he's hooked on about half a minute before the emetine makes him spew his ring. It's an art, really. If you do it right you get to when just the Scotch'll make him throw up. Our brother got that far and it's only about twenty-five per cent that do. Then the big white chief sends him out on probation-great on timing, the old chief. Comes a fortnight later and our brother's back in. Acute exhaustion and malnutrition. What he'd been doing, he'd been knocking back the Scotch and spewing his bloody guts out and then knocking back the Scotch. And so on. You see what I mean. There's a geezer who really cares about drink. It's what I said, our little Maxie's still in the kindergarten.

"Well, I'll be getting along." The nurse picked up his tray and shook his head philosophically. "Oh, you get some peculiar buggers in here," he added, seemingly by way of introduction to further material.

"Don't let us keep you," said Naidu.

"Not on your life, General. And you'd better not stay around too long either. We don't want our Maxie getting over-excited and tossing and turning all night. He's being tapered off on the sodium amytal, see. Well, so long, my trusty lads. Fix bayonets and charge the old bomb, eh? That's the style."

The man walked smartly away.

Naidu said, "I'd be happy to go straight to whoever's in charge here and lodge a complaint in person. You've only to say the word, Max."

"Oh, Moti, where's your sense of humor? He's really a very nice lad. In his way. He's as gentle as a child. When another child's trying to take its toy railway train off it. No, that's not quite fair."

"Is he the one you call the nice nurse?" asked Churchill. "Because I'd hate to-"

"No, the nice nurse is truly and demonstrably nice. He says I need looking after. He's promised to sit next to me on the coach trip to St. Jerome's Priory on Sunday."

Ayscue grinned. "What are you going to do there?"

"Look at it, I suppose, and then come back. It'll make a break."

A minute later the three visitors had taken their leave and were walking back along the corridor. Churchill was brooding. He said in a strained voice,

"Why does this sort of thing have to happen? A chap like Max in that horrible situation. It isn't right."

"He's being made well," said Naidu. "It's necessary, James. I didn't like that swine of a nurse any better than you did, but you may be sure that if he over-stepped the mark in a big way then the authorities would get to hear of it and take necessary action. You know that. You must be

reasonable."

"I'm trying to be. I'm trying to see the reason in it. It isn't the nurse so much. I don't want there to be people like that but I'm not against the idea of it. What I'm against is it being possible for a man like Max being able to damage himself in that way. A man like anybody, come to that."

They emerged into the brilliant sunshine. Naidu said earnestly,

"Man has free will. He has the things of this world before him and it's up to him what he does with them. That we must all recognize. There is such a thing as alcohol and if a man indulges in it to an excess then he has only himself to blame. I trust I'm not sounding censorious towards our good friend when I say that, you understand."

Averting his eyes from the stone figure of the lion-like creature, which they were now passing, Churchill looked at Naidu. The small neat handsome face with its shapely bones and rich brown skin was troubled, but not unhappy. It was as if new reasons for envying him came up every day.

"I see that, Moti," said Churchill. "But why couldn't alcohol just have had good effects, or at least not have had such bad ones as it's had on the fellows in that ward? It could have been, you know, no worse than overeating, making you fat or something if you went on with it. So why did it have to be so bad?"

"My dear James, why is there arsenic, why are there poisonous snakes, why is there cholera and bubonic plague and the other things of that sort? Come along, padre, you're the expert here. You must render me some assistance."

"I'd be worse than useless, I'm afraid," said Ayscue. "I've been into this with James before, more than once. I just make him angry."

Churchill flushed. "Not angry, Willie, merely disturbed to find someone of your intelligence defending the indefensible."

"Don't let's start."

"All right. Sorry."

As they drew level with the water-tower, a door in the adjacent building opened and the two women they had seen earlier came out. Churchill felt a shock, as if the aircraft had again passed between him and the sun. He realized that he had thought of the girl every couple of minutes since his first sight of her. He caught her glance now and held it until they passed. Immediately he was filled with shame at his own foolishness and lack of forethought in not having looked at the girl properly. She was thin and tall and perhaps had a slight stoop and her hair was neither light nor dark. Instead of noticing more he had just stared into her eyes, and after five seconds he could not even remember their color. But he had a feeling he would know her again anywhere.

With no more said they rounded the corner and made for their car, one of the passé jeeps

wished on the unit as a result of some turn of Captain Leonard's thought. Yellow lettering on its body said ~~6 HQ Adm Bn~~, shorthand for the unit's cover name. Ayscue got into the driver's seat and they moved off.

"It's an exceedingly pleasant situation, you can say that much." Naidu looked out at the grassy slopes, dotted with rhododendrons and azaleas, between which they were riding. "Doesn't the whole place remind you of an English country house of the traditional sort?"

"It used to be just that," said Ayscue. "I was reading their pamphlet. Apparently the fellow who was squire here in Victorian times was a sort of pioneer in mental illness. Set up what amounted to a clinic, one of the first in the world. Then one of his successors handed it over to a trust, and there we are."

"I can see there's been a lot of building since those days, but it still keeps its very charming historical appearance."

Sitting behind them, Churchill heard little of this. He was trying to satisfy himself that there was nothing he could have done about the girl. Even if he had had the resource to give his two friends the slip and follow her back to her ward, he would probably not have been able to find out so much as her name. And her name alone would not have been much use—just a lot better than nothing at all. Why had he not been able to run after her, pretend he thought he knew her or something? Oh well, it was done now, or rather not done.

At the lodge, a thickset man in a blue suit peered at them through a sort of guichet, then waved them past impatiently.

"Rather lax security measures here," said Naidu. "How does that worthy fellow know we aren't three raving maniacs who have overpowered three unsuspecting Army types? He'd get short shrift from our gallant Captain Leonard."

Churchill roused himself; he would think about the girl again later. "Apart from the violent chaps, who never leave the ward, it's all open here, apparently. Max was telling me last week. The problem is keeping chaps who've been chucked out from worming their way back in."

The traffic across their front was heavy. While they waited for a gap, a motorcyclist in Army uniform drew over to the curb near them, stopped his machine and pulled it onto its rest. As he approached, pushing his goggles up, they saw that he was a dispatch-rider of the Royal Corps of Signals. He crossed to Ayscue's side of the jeep, saluted with something of a flourish, and said,

"Excuse me, sir, but you seem to be part of the unit I'm trying to find, Sixth HQ Admin Battalion. Can you tell me where your place is? This is the second time I've been along this bit of road."

"We're going there now, Corporal," said Ayscue. "Perhaps we can deliver your packet for you."

"Not unless one of you gentlemen happens to be..."—the man referred to a typewritten instruction—"Captain P. B. Leonard, 17th Dragoons? I've got to deliver to him personally and get

his signature, you see. Thank you all the same, sir. Now if you could just give me an idea..."

Churchill half listened while Ayscue furnished directions. The dispatch-rider's head and shoulders were out of sight from the back seat of the jeep, and his voice was unremarkable. He was quite young: nothing more.

"You'll be there long before we are," Ayscue was saying. "By the way, I thought you fellows were all on four wheels these days."

"We keep up a few of the bikes for special runs like this where there isn't a lot to carry. Better in traffic, too. And this weather, well, it's a treat to be in the saddle. Well, thanks again, sir. I'll probably pass you on my way back."

In a few seconds he was off. Churchill fancied he waved as he went, but was not sure. By the time there was a gap in the stream of vehicles long enough to take the jeep, the dispatch-rider was out of sight ahead of them.

Naidu started a conversation with Ayscue about discipline, inspired, he said, by their brief exchange with Corporal Fawkes an hour earlier. Was that admittedly very pleasant young NCO not perhaps a trifle... free and easy? He, Naidu, ought not to have encouraged this spirit by offering even that very minor jest of his at the expense of Security and, by implication, of a brother officer. Or was he being over-scrupulous, too much the son of a subadar-major father whose views on such matters were probably indistinguishable from those current in Victoria's Indian Army?

As Churchill had expected, Ayscue said more or less that everything was all right really. Saying that everything was all right really, however different it sometimes looked, earned Ayscue his living, of course, but at the moment none of his masters was in earshot. Surely he must forget himself sometimes? Never to do so would verge on the inhuman. Well: he was decent enough in other respects for it to be regrettable that he was a parson.

Churchill soon got tired of regretting this. Although he would not be able to think about the girl properly until after dark and when he was alone, he was encouraged to do so now by the stretch of country they were passing through, sunlit meadows on one side, shade over the road and on the other side, where there was also a stream splashing down among rocks with ash and birch trees on the slopes and drifts of dead leaves seemingly undisturbed since autumn.

It was not that Churchill visualized himself walking among the trees with the girl, nor so much that he would have liked to be doing so. Instead, by a process familiar since childhood but never analyzed, he used the thought of her to focus his attention on the scene, finding much more in it physically than he would otherwise have cared to, and taking its and her joint existence as a signal, almost a guarantee, that the real joyful life existed somewhere. Churchill was not an unhappy person, either by nature or by experience, but since leaving school five years ago he had several times been disconcerted by doubts about whether the joy of which he knew his heart was capable would ever find its occasion or its setting. Only sad or frightening things, like this afternoon's visit to Max Hunter, seemed to have the power that joy ought to have, and the

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