They appeared to be husband and wife – man standing, woman seated: the classic married pose of Authority flanked by Loyalty – but when I got closer I saw they were both men. It was just after eight in the morning, a smudgy winter dawn in London, on the Embassy stairs. The doors would not be open to the public for another hour. I mounted the stairs but couldn't get to the door without asking the man who was standing to move aside. He made a respectful noise, then spoke.

'We're going to America!'

Americans call it the States.

I said, 'You'll need visas.'

'That's why we're here,' the seated one said.

'You should be at the other door – the Consulate, visa section. It's right around the corner, on Upper Grosvenor Street.'

The news that they were waiting at the wrong door didn't upset them. They laughed, as the English often do in such situations. They said, 'Silly old us!' and 'What a wheeze!'

It seemed to be a national characteristic. The English had been getting bad news for so long, they had learned to cope. They disliked complainers, even when the complaint was justified, and regarded such people as spineless. Most of the English seemed rather proud of their capacity for suffering. It made them the world's best airline passengers, but had given them one of the world's worst airlines. Surely this 'mustn't grumble' attitude accounted for a great deal of Britain's decline? But of course it made the place nice and quiet. Our vices are so often our virtues as well.

'You must be cold,' I said.

'Absolutely freezing.' This was said, with one eyebrow raised, in the most matter-of-fact tone.

'Never mind. We'll soon be in California.'

'Fat lot of good that's doing me now,' the matter-of-fact one said.

‘Oh, we’re going to have a little moan, are we?’

‘Listen to him – after his blameless weekend!’

‘You said you were impervious to cold.’

‘On your bike! I never said impervious – don’t know what the flipping word means!’

This was all spoken with sharpness and speed, and the effect was comic – friendly, too – even in the misty brown dawn of a January morning. From that moment I began to wonder what would happen to them in California.

The dark-haired one, who was standing, faced the fairer one, who was still seated, and said, ‘Lambie here got me up at the crack of dawn. Said we had to hurry – frightened me with stories about long queues and red tape. So off we go to stand at the wrong door! Feel me cheeks. They’re solid ice! I haven’t even had me tea!’

‘Forgot our thermal underwear, didn’t we, chicken?’

‘I’m wearing me serviceable string vest.’

I said, ‘How about a coffee inside?’

This made them go very silent. They seemed a bit suspicious. But I had noticed that a kindness to an English person often arouses unease or suspicion. It is a very nervous nation. In a wary voice, the dark-haired one said, ‘Do you think it’d be all right?’

‘What about security? Laser beams and that,’ the other said. ‘You must get ever so many bomb scares.’

I said, ‘You don’t look very dangerous to me.’

‘Him – he’s the dangerous one,’ the dark-haired man said. ‘Oh, he’s a hard lad!’

They followed me in – our security man squinting at them and giving their colorful shoulder bags a close inspection for weapons – and I heard one of them say, ‘Laser beams, you daft prat!’

The coffee urn was outside Al Sanger’s office. This morning there was a plate of Danish pastries next to the urn. Sanger often bought them at a place off Curzon Street – deliberately there so that he could say, ‘I just picked up some tarts in Shepherd Market. Want one?’

I poured three cups of coffee and urged them to take some pastry.

‘Don’t mind if I do!’

‘I won’t say no!’

‘Our first American breakfast.’

So they had overcome their suspicion. I said, ‘It’s part of our job to encourage tourism.’

‘It’s lovely and warm in here.’

‘Think I’ll put me feet up!’

Their names, they said, were Cary and Lamb. Cary had the dark hair and broad shoulders, and he had a tiny Irish chin and a high sweet voice. Lamb at first glance was a young man with reddish hair, but looking closer I saw he was quite old – over sixty – with rather nasty blue eyes and his hair harshly colored and coarse-textured and spread across his crown to cover his baldness. He wore an earring, and Cary had a heavy chain around his neck.

Lamb said, ‘You actually work here, do you?’

‘’Course he works here, you pillock!’

I said, ‘But I can’t give you much help with your visas.’

‘We won’t have any trouble,’ Cary said. ‘We’ve never been Communists or prostitutes, and we haven’t been in the nick. That’s the kind of thing they want to know, don’t they? We’ve been good lads, haven’t we, Lambie?’

‘Apart from your occasional lapses of taste,’ Lamb said.

‘Listen to the incurable cottager!’ Cary shrieked. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket. But his trousers were so tight the cigarettes were squashed and unsmokable. He said, ‘There’s another packet of fags gone west.’

‘About time you gave up smoking. It’ll stunt your growth.’

‘Aren’t you happy with me growth, Lambie?’

They both laughed at this. I couldn’t see the joke, but the sight of them laughing so easily amused me.

‘What are you planning to do in the States?’

‘We’re going to California,’ Lamb said.

‘I mean, after you get there.’

‘We don’t have any plans for after that. We’re going to California a special way – an ingenious way. It’s Cary’s big plan, see. He does have the occasional brilliant scheme.’

‘I’d like to hear it,’ I said.

Cary had thrown his squashed cigarettes into the waste-basket. Now he was bent over the basket and reaching in, trying to retrieve them.

‘Look at him,’ Lamb said. ‘Fossicking in the waste-bin!’

‘I see one,’ Cary said.

‘He sees one,’ Lamb said, rolling his eyes. ‘Picking up fag ends – can’t take him anywhere.’

It was a double-act. They were spirited and mocking, and they kept it up until my secretary arrived. They found her presence intimidating, and they asked whether they should go. I said they shouldn’t hurry away, and I kicked the door shut.

Lamb heard her tuning the radio for the news. There was a moment of music.

‘Music,’ he said. ‘Oh, be still my dancing feet!’

‘Give over,’ Cary said.

‘Tell him your brilliant scheme.’

‘Yes, mum,’ Cary said, and grinned and gave himself dimples as he looked at me. ‘We’re secondhand furniture dealers, the kind of rubbish that innocent people call antiques. We find the stuff all over the place. You’ve seen the signs. “House Clearances Our Specialty.”’

Lamb said, “‘Top Prices Paid for Your Unwanted Furniture.’”

Cary frowned. He said, “‘That Old Chest in Your Attic Could Be Worth a Fortune.’”

‘Cary specializes in old chests. You have to watch him.’

‘You flaming wally!’ Cary said, and turning back to me, he said, ‘It’s absolute balls about the top prices, but we buy what we can afford, mainly tables, benches, mirrors, picture frames, and that. Windsor chairs. Welsh dressers if we’re lucky.’

‘There’s an awful lot of lifting,’ Lamb said. ‘I’ve done me back I don’t know how many times.’

‘He’s the original Welsh dresser, is Lambie,’ Cary said. ‘Aren’t you, sunshine?’

‘You’re just saying that because you like me drawers.’

‘That’s what we should have called the shop, you know – “Chests and Drawers.”’

‘Do me a favor!’ Lamb said in an actressy voice.

But I noticed that everything they said, no matter how mocking, was tinged with what sounded like real affection.

I said, ‘What is your shop called?’

“‘Pining for You” – isn’t it horrid? We hate it,’ Lamb said. ‘We used to do stripping in our tank, to order. Anything you wanted stripped – within limits – we’d chuck in.’

Cary said, ‘There’s a boom in stripped pine in London at the moment. You get knackered, scrubbing the paint off, but you can sell anything if it’s stripped. We got top whack for a coffin once. Can you imagine someone buying an old coffin? I suppose some clapped-out Dracula –’

‘We’ve got a lot of American customers. They adore our refectory tables,’ Lamb said. ‘Or any sort of shelving. They’re mad on shelving over there.’

“‘Mad on shelving” – you make them sound a pack of flaming morons, Lambie.’

‘Well, they are,’ Lamb said, timing his pause after that word, ‘mad on shelving.’

‘Americans buy quality,’ Cary said.

‘Crawler!’ Lamb said. ‘You’re shameless!’

Cary said, ‘And that’s what gave me the idea of the lorry. Did you know you can ship a lorry across the Atlantic and it costs the same whether it’s full or empty?’

‘That’s Cary’s brilliant scheme. We’re going to take a lorry-load of country pine

furniture to California.’

‘And flog it,’ Cary said. ‘To pay our way.’

‘We reckon on making a tidy fortune on it.’

‘Don’t tell me too much,’ I said. ‘If you do, I’ll have to advise you about the regulations governing the import of dutiable goods.’

‘Muggins put his foot in it,’ Lamb said.

‘Oh, belt up,’ Cary said. But he was laughing.

‘I won’t report you,’ I said. ‘But you’d better go get your visas. The Consulate opens pretty soon.’

‘Crikey, I feel better. I needed that coffee. You’re awfully kind,’ Cary said.

‘You’re welcome,’ I said.

‘That’s nice, isn’t it? “You’re welcome.” English people never say that.’ He looked at Lamb and said, ‘You’re welcome, sunshine.’

‘Send me a postcard,’ I said.

‘We’ll do better than that,’ Lamb said. ‘We’ll report back.’

‘When English people go to California,’ I said, ‘they either come back the next day or stay there for the rest of their lives.’

Lamb said, ‘I wonder what we’ll do.’

‘You could do both,’ I said. ‘After all, there are two of you. Each one could –’

‘There’s only one,’ Cary said. ‘I mean to say, we’re sticking together.’

Lamb gave Cary an affectionate push, and Cary lowered his eyes. I noticed again the great difference between their ages. Lamb’s neck was loose and the roots of his hair were gray and his hands were mottled with liver spots. But his voice and his gestures, the promptness of his wit, made him seem youthful.

‘That’s the idea,’ I said. ‘Stick together.’

‘He’s my wife,’ Lamb said. ‘Aren’t you, petal?’

I never thought I would see them again. I imagined them crossing the United States in an old English truck loaded with pine furniture – Cary at the wheel, Lamb riding shotgun, going west.

Of all the get-rich-quick schemes I had ever heard – and I had heard many – this was the best. It was a truckload of furniture, but they paid only for the truck. This would transport them to California, and the sale of the furniture paid for the trip. It had everything – sunshine, freedom, a good product, a free ride, and a guaranteed profit. It had taken a little capital, but even more enterprise; and it gave me hope. Whenever London went dead on me, whenever I thought of ditching my job and clearing out, I thought of Cary and Lamb in their truck, with their pine furniture, bumping down the highway underneath a big blue sky. It made me want to get married and go.

I was sure they would wind up in San Francisco, overstay their visas, and go to ground. Many Europeans did these days – it was only Arabs who had the confidence to head home when their visas expired. I had met the two men in early January. In late February, the security man at the main entrance phoned me and said, 'A Mr Cary and friend down here, sir. Doesn't have an appointment – name's not in the book – but he says he wants to talk to you. What shall I tell him, sir?'

A Mr Cary and friend: they were back!

'Send them up,' I said.

But Lamb was not the friend, and I barely recognized Cary. He was thinner, he had grown a beard, and he was dressed like a man in the English Department bucking for a promotion – tweed sports jacket, leather tie, corduroy trousers, argyle socks, and shiny shoes. He was a far cry from the junk dealer in the ragged scarf and flat cap and greasy raincoat of six weeks ago. Some people look worse, much stranger, even crooked, when they dress stylishly. That was how Cary seemed to me – as if he were trying to pull a fast one on me. He was frowning, pushing out his lips, jerking his beard with his cheeks.

And the friend was a girl with a big soft face, who chewed gum with her mouth open. She wore a man's pea jacket and a woolly hat. Cary introduced her to me as 'Honey.'

There are some nicknames that are obstacles to friendship. 'Honey' is one of them. At first it seems overaffectionate, and then it seems like mockery, and finally it sounds like a word of abuse.

Cary was holding her hand. He did not let go of it, even to smoke. He shook out a cigarette, put it to his lips, and lit it, all with one busy hand. In itself his hand-holding was not strange, but he had never once touched Lamb.

I said, ‘I’m glad you kept your word about giving me a report.’

Cary didn’t smile. He sat stiffly in his chair with a look of vague incomprehension on his face.

‘Just stopped in to say hello,’ he said. ‘And to introduce you to Honey.’

The girl snapped her gum at me and said, ‘Cary told me how you helped him’ – she was American – ‘and he really appreciated it. Usually Embassy people are such assholes. I remember once when I was in Mexico.’

Cary coughed and said, ‘You must be busy.’ He looked as if, already, he wanted to go.

‘Tell me about the trip,’ I said.

‘There’s so much to tell.’

‘The crossing,’ I said. ‘What was the ship like?’

‘I was seasick most of the time. It was a Polish freighter, full of butch sailors. The food was dreadful – turnips, swedes, boiled cabbage, stews of rancid mince. It was a week of misery. I stayed in my bunk the whole time.’

‘What about your friend?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Lamb,’ I said.

‘Oh, him. He started acting strange. He’d disappear for hours and then when I asked where he’d been he’d say, “In the bowels of the ship.” He thought he was being incredibly funny.’

I smiled, remembering Lamb, imagining how he would have said that. Where was the little old comedian? Where was the old Cary, for that matter? This one was entirely new – disapproving and full of seriousness. He was grave, but what was the point?

‘It wasn’t funny,’ Cary said. ‘He was always cracking jokes. When people who aren’t funny start to make jokes it sounds stupid.’

His accent was gone, too.

I said, ‘New York must have been quite a surprise.’

Cary shrugged. ‘Lamb met a chap in a bar and got very excited. “He’s giving us a place to kip – he’s got bags of room!”’ It was a flash of the old Cary – he did Lamb’s effeminate voice very well, and it reminded me of how his own voice had deepened. He glanced at the girl whose hand he was holding and said, ‘The chap was into S and M. Well, S really. Very keen on spanking. “How do you know you don’t like it if you’ve never tried it?”’

‘How did you get out of that one?’ I asked.

‘A cobbler’s bench and a lot of pleading. I reckon he’s cobbling someone on it right this minute.’ He weighed the girl’s hand in his own, lifting it and considering it. ‘Hungry?’

Honey squeezed her face into an expression that said, Sorta, and Cary said to me, ‘We have to go. I promised to show Honey around the neighborhood where I grew up – Stepney Green.’

‘But what about your scheme?’ I asked. ‘What about the trip?’

‘Don’t ask. The lorry broke down on the New Jersey Turnpike. Turnpike! Why is it that the most horrid places in the States have the prettiest names?’

‘Like Stepney Green – the jewel of East London?’

Cary did not respond to that. He said, ‘We were towed to a garage. It seemed we needed a water pump. Two hundred for the tow, another two hundred for the pump. Nice round figures. We hadn’t a penny.’

‘How did you pay?’

‘A refectory table, lovely it was, from a boys’ school in Eastbourne. It was covered with carved initials, some of them going back to the eighteenth century. Just the thing for a garage mechanic in New Jersey.’

I had the strong sense that I did not know this man at all; that we were talking about nothing; that he did not know me.

‘The radiator packed up in Virginia, on something called the Skyline Drive – Lamb loved the name. The radiator cost us a beautiful Victorian chest – two drawers, brass fittings, lots of carvings.’ He looked at Honey again and waggled her hand and said, ‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ she said.

‘Bored?’

She snorted a little air.

He kissed her. I felt I was watching someone taking a bite of candy. He licked his mouth when he finished kissing her.

‘Let’s go,’ she said.

‘So you didn’t make it to California?’ I said.

‘We did, after a fashion. By the time we got to Missouri we’d traded most of the big pieces. And over the next three weeks, the rest of it went, to buy petrol and food. We slept in the lorry. It was getting emptier and emptier. Pretty soon, all the best pieces were gone. We’d turned them into cheeseburgers.’

‘Not all of them,’ Honey said. She surprised me. Her voice was brighter than Cary’s, and a little malicious and lively.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked.

‘Pomona?’ She made it a polite question, as some uncertain Americans do when they give information. ‘I go outside one morning and who do I see in the front yard but these two English guys.’

‘So you met Mr Lamb,’ I said.

‘And his friend,’ she said.

‘Not me,’ Cary said in a disgusted way. ‘It was a chicken he found in Arizona. A hitchhiker. “Oh, let’s pick him up – he looks lost!”’ Cary squinted at me, giving me a powerful look of indignation, and he said, ‘Lamb was really beastly to that kid. It was a revelation to me.’

Honey said, ‘They were fags.’

Cary swallowed and said, ‘I think he’s sick. I think he’s strange. I think he lost his bottle.’

Now Honey was smirking. ‘My first husband is into English antiques. They really hit it off.’ She uttered a coarse laugh and dragged Cary’s hand off her lap and said, ‘Let’s go, sailor; we’re wasting this man’s valuable time.’

‘We’re looking for a flat,’ Cary said. ‘I’m not going to live over the shop anymore – especially after I’ve seen the way they live in America.’

‘We’ve got this grubby little room,’ Honey said, ‘in a dump called Kilburn!’

‘We’ll find something,’ Cary said in a solicitous voice.

‘What about Lamb?’ I said.

Cary pretended not to recognize the name for a moment, and then he said, ‘We were really shocked. It opened my eyes. Lamb’s a corrupter. That’s where he belongs – Pomona.’

‘Shut up about Pomona,’ Honey said. ‘It’s a hundred times better than this dump. Hey, are we going or aren’t we?’

So they left. What had gone wrong on the ideal trip, I could not say. But what worried me was that in a half-hour of talking, in the presence of a woman he obviously loved, this very funny man had not smiled once.