If Sir Charles Smallwood had not sent Miss Gowrie to visit me at the Embassy, and if I had not helped rid this Mortlake landlady of her vengeful lodger, I would never have given this gentleman another thought. Miss Gowrie had called him ‘Charlie.’ She made me curious and she allowed me an excuse to see him.

We knew him vaguely. He was usually invited to our Embassy parties and very often to dinners. He was, somehow, on the permanent guest list. But he was seldom a guest. He invariably turned down the invitations. I had seen him once, but only long enough to shake his hand – a damp, slack, small-boned hand. The only other thing about him that I could remember was that he had been wearing evening dress of an old-fashioned kind – bib and stiff collar, white scooped-out waistcoat, starched cuffs, black trousers, and tails. He should have looked like a prince; in fact, he looked like a headwaiter, though he was not so poised. It was the functionaries, the waiters and doormen in London, who dressed correctly. The rest of us seldom did. Sir Charles wore his evening dress the way an old veteran wears a uniform for a regimental reunion. He looked uncomfortable in this stiff and slightly ill-fitting suit, and it also looked forty years out of date. I could not remember his face.

His address was in the computer, and his code number – eight digits – explained why he was repeatedly invited to Embassy functions. He was a very high grade of guest, the best English ally, a baronet from an old family.

Al Sanger, from the Legal Department, had shown me which keys to hit on the computer.

‘If the British knew the kind of information we had on them in this thing, they’d deep-six every one of us,’ Sanger said. ‘Greatgrandfather’s birthplace, wife’s maiden name, nanny’s husband’s political preference, criminal record, queerness quotient, shoe size, taste in underwear, magazine subscriptions, credit rating – do me a favor!’

Smallwood’s name and code had come up, and Sanger was scrutinizing the alignments of file references, the green letters and numbers.

He said, ‘I don’t even know this guy!’

He seemed angry with himself, so I said, ‘It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I only met him once.’

Sanger said, ‘But this is the kind of guy we’re supposed to know. It’s why we’re here!’

‘Really?’ I wondered if he believed what he had just said.

‘Yeah – to meet the opinion-formers.’

‘How do you know he’s an opinion-former?’

‘If you see a guy with a long white beard, wearing a red suit and carrying a bag of toys and saying, “Ho-ho-ho,” you’d be pretty stupid if you didn’t call him Santa Claus,’ Sanger said. ‘It’s all in the profile. Look at Smallwood’s. Look at those ratings. That’s a pedigree and a half! Where’d you get his name?’

‘From a little old lady.’

‘That’s funny, you know? We’re in the business of information-gathering, and you stand there uttering pointless jokes and tiresome evasions. Give me a break. I hate unreliable witnesses.’

‘It’s no joke. The little old lady’s name is Miss Gowrie.’

‘Let’s find out her bust size,’ Sanger said and leered at the computer screen. ‘We know everything.’ Then suddenly he shouted, ‘He lives in Clapham!’

‘What’s so funny?’

‘The man on the Clapham omnibus,’ he said.

It was the first time I had ever heard this picturesque description. It brought to mind the vivid image of a thinfaced man sitting alone in an old double-decker bus – a bowler hat on his head, and brass rails on the stairwell, and posters advertising Players Weights and beef tea pasted on the freshly painted red sides; the man swaying as the bus rattled on hard rubber wheels down an avenue of brown cobblestones.

I said, ‘It has a nice sound.’

‘It just means “the man in the street” – it’s a legal term here. In American law he’s called the fair and reasonable man. Didn’t you go to law school?’

‘I haven’t had your advantages, Al.’

‘I can see that,’ he said. ‘Anyway, a lot of Foreign Service people have law degrees. See, they know the subtleties in the law, but how can you expect the man on the Clapham omnibus to know them?’ And he grinned. ‘See what I mean?’

‘The average man,’ I said.

‘Right. A bloke, as they say here. Only this guy’ – he was tapping the display screen of the computer, where Sir Charles Smallwood’s paragraph was illuminated – ‘this guy is no ordinary bloke. One thing’s for sure. The Clapham address is a front. Probably a pied à terre. Baronets don’t live in Clapham.’

He had no phone, or else it was unlisted. I wrote to him in Clapham, at the address shown on the computer, inviting him for a meal. He was prompt in refusing. I invited him for a drink. He replied saying he was tied up: he was going to be in the country for a few weeks. I liked ‘in the country’ – it meant out of town. I let those weeks pass. I wrote again. Was he interested in a pair of complimentary tickets to the London première of Up North, a black folk-opera performed by the Harlem Arts Collective? No, he was not. There was a practiced politeness in his refusals – he was good, not to say graceful, even lordly, at declining invitations. His handwriting had a black and spattery loveliness. He was a hard man to raise.

This sharpened my desire to meet him, and in the interval I had discovered something about the Smallwoods. They were English Catholics – it said so on our computer. There is something faintly exotic about Catholics in England, something spooky and tribal and secretive. They worry people. They are like Jews in the United States, and they are seen in the same way, as outsiders and potential conspirators. They are feared and somewhat disliked, and they are always suspected of not supporting the Protestant monarchy for religious reasons. The Smallwoods traced their ancestry back to the reign of Henry VIII, when they had been recusants – dissenters – and it was their boast that in four hundred years not a single day had passed without holy mass being celebrated in a secret chapel at Smallwood Park, in Hertfordshire. They were like early Christians: they were persecuted, they hid, they clung to their faith, they remained steadfast – and he was one of them.

He lived within walking distance of my apartment in Battersea – up the road and just on the other side of Lavender Hill, on Parma Crescent. I walked past the house three times before summoning the courage to knock. The house was one in a terrace of twenty, two-up, two-down, with the shades drawn and two trash barrels in the front yard – the other houses had rose bushes or hydrangeas. There was an unwashed milk bottle on the front step. Surely this was the wrong house?

Not seeing a bell or knocker, I rattled the metal flap on the letter slot and waited. After a moment there was a shadow on the glass of the door. The door opened, but only a crack, and from this a hidden face spoke to me, asking me what I wanted. It was the voice of a man muttering into a blanket.

‘I’m looking for Sir Charles Smallwood.’

‘No admittance on business,’ the man said.

What did that mean?

‘This isn’t business,’ I said. ‘This is a social call.’

‘And you are?’

I still could not determine whether the man I was speaking to was Sir Charles Smallwood. I had a feeling that he was some sort of manservant. He was tetchy and suspicious and overprotective, and even – like some English servants I’d seen – domineering. I told him who I was and gave him my American Embassy calling card, with the eagle embossed on it in gold. It had been specially designed by a team of psychiatrists to impress foreign nationals.

‘Please wait there,’ he said.

He shut the door and left me on the front doorstep, but less than a minute later I heard him shooting the bolt inside, and saw his shadow again on the glass, and the door was opened to me.

There was no hallway. I walked from his front step into his front room in one stride. And I was sorry now that I had come, because clearly this was the man’s bedroom. There was a cot and a chair beside it, and it was heated by an electric fire – the orange coils on one bar. It was not enough heat. On the floor, propped against the wall, was a very good painting in a heavy gilt frame. It was black and incongruous and instead of hinting at opulence it gave the room the air of a junk shop.

I said, ‘I hope I’m not intruding.’

‘It is rather awkward – your coming unannounced. Will you have tea?’

‘No, thank you. I can’t stay.’

‘As you wish.’

He wore a torn sweater and paint-splashed trousers and scuffed shoes. He might have been a deckhand, spending some time ashore in this small room. If this was Sir Charles’s servant, he was being treated rather poorly. He had hair like pencil shavings, the same orangy woody color, the same crinkly texture.

He said, ‘Perhaps a glass of sherry?’

‘I’d love one.’

He left the room and I had a chance to look it over more carefully. It was like a monk’s cell; it was not improved by the old radio, the wilted geranium, or the narrow cot. I heard footsteps upstairs, a solid tread that banged against wooden planks in the ceiling. And there was a burring noise, like steam and bells, of a television behind the wall, in the next house. It was a hell of a place for a servant to sit, in this front room. I had the impression that there were a number of other people in the house – it was not only the feet on the floorboards above my head, but voices, and the sound of water humming through different pipes in the wall.

‘Sorry I was so long,’ the man said when he returned. He handed me a glass of sherry. ‘Couldn’t find the right glass.’

It was crystal, with eight sides tapering to a heavy base, and it shimmered with a lovely marmalade glint, even in the pale dirty light of this room. A coat of arms was etched on one narrow plane. It was one of the most beautiful glasses I had ever seen. But I drank from it and nearly spewed. The sherry had a vile taste, like varnish, and its smell was like the fumes of burning plastic. Tears of disgust came to my eyes, and I tried to wink them away as I swallowed.

The man watched me. He was not drinking.

‘It’s awful to drop in,’ I said. The man said nothing. He seemed to agree that it was awful. ‘But this was the only address I had.’

‘This is the only address. There is no other.’

I felt uncomfortable with him waiting there and watching. I wanted him to announce me to Sir Charles, or else to shuffle away in the direction of the noise – get those noisy fools to pipe down – so that I could empty the remainder of my poisonous sherry into the geranium pot.

Just then there was a shout above our heads. We both looked at the ceiling in time for the even sharper reply – an angry but incoherent complaint.

‘They’re at it again. Fight like cats.’

‘Can’t you do anything about it?’

‘They wouldn’t listen.’ He was silent a moment. He tucked his hands under his sweater to warm them in the thickness of the folds. ‘No, not them!’

‘I don’t think I could stand that.’

‘You’d get used to it.’ He said this in a firm schoolmasterish way, as if he were telling me something I didn’t know but ought to.

I said, ‘I wonder.’

‘You would,’ he said, ‘if you had no choice.’

I was put off by his know-it-all tone and thought I had been kept waiting long enough. I had had too much bad sherry and peevish advice. I was going to say If you don’t mind –

But before my tongue could make that thought a complete sentence, he said, ‘What was it you wanted?’

‘I want to speak to Sir Charles Smallwood.’

‘But I’m Charlie!’

You say, Of course, what else? It seems predictable, even perhaps an anticlimax. But only in hindsight do events seem inevitable. At the time, sitting in that monk’s cell of a room under the tramping feet and humming pipes, it was the last thing in the world that I expected.

He saw the shock on my face. He said, ‘Shall I explain?’

He told me about a man from an old family with a good name who, in the middle of his life, believed he had a curse on him. The man loved his family, but he felt they were to blame for the curse. It was a kind of hereditary illness – nausea sometimes. He was disgusted when he saw common red-faced wheezing men drink beer; his gorge rose when he saw their vicious hands – some of them seemed to have paws of peeling skin. He glanced at the men in horror. They stared back at him. He could not make friends with people who frightened him and, in his way, he suffered.

The things he owned had sentimental value, but they were also quite useless. He owned a magnificent portrait of an ancestor, but it was so heavy it could not hang on the wall of his tiny house. He owned a boar’s head with curved tusks that had been in the family for generations; various family histories – a shelf of books – some silver plate, a chalice, and glassware that, under the terms of the legacy, he could not sell or dispose of (who wanted that family crest, anyway?); some old documents on vellum; and odds and ends of no value – Bibles, photographs, enormous latchkeys, some splinters of saints’ bones, and a linen scrap from a martyr’s winding sheet.

He had had no education, apart from two years at Eton. He still owned some of his

Eton clothes, and he was lucky that his tails still fitted him – he had not grown at all after being withdrawn from the school at the age of fifteen. He had worn out his cricketing flannels, but not by playing cricket. He still had some of his tweeds. What clothes he had were various school uniforms – party uniform, games uniform, weekend uniform. But no occasions arose when these uniforms were suitable – only a party now and then, but that was all, because only the grandest parties required him to wear white tie.

The family collapse had come quickly. The death of his father and then his mother – within six weeks of each other. There had been no time to make any financial arrangements at all. Tax demands were made; some were met. The death duties – awful pair of words – remained unpaid. There was no more money. The house had belonged to the family for almost five hundred years. It was sold to an Australian, who boasted that he was the great-grandson of a pickpocket who had been transported to Botany Bay.

The children were shocked. Instead of legacies being handed out, debts were apportioned. They had never lived in much style, but now each of the children – there were four – found that he was nearly destitute and owed a considerable amount of money. Everything was gone; there was nothing more to sell. The children felt as though they had been turned into debtors and would soon be hunted down.

They consulted solicitors and barristers and were given a certain amount of reckless advice. ‘Leave the country at once,’ a man said. His name was Horace Whybrow. ‘Turn yourselves into a limited company and then declare the company bankrupt,’ a Queen’s Counsel said. His name was Dennis Orde-Widdowson. They remembered the names because the advice was so dire, and the bills for this advice put them further into debt.

The children found that by separating, living in different parts of London and letting matters drift, they could survive. And yet this man, who was the eldest child, who had inherited his father’s title, had also inherited the greatest part of the debts – this man often felt as if there were a tide of debt and disgrace rising around him. He was up to his neck. There was no one who would help him, no one who would understand.

He moved to Mortlake and lived in an upper room of a house that at times seemed to suffocate him. He had black moods. He lived with the blinds drawn. The landlady was kind, but she was no help – she too was down on her luck.

He felt he had to kill himself. He did not want to.

Wouldn’t someone else in his position understand? Not exactly in his position, but a member of the aristocracy, the withered part of it, from an old family, with a meaningless title like baronet, and an important title like doctor. He knew that if he did not explain his suffering to someone soon, he would not have to kill himself – he

would be too ill to prevent himself from dying.

Then a man was found. He had a small title. He was a member of the Scottish aristocracy, and his name was the Honorable Aleister Colquhoun. He was a National Health doctor. Every person, even an aristocrat, had a right in this country to see a psychiatrist, free of charge.

The doctor was sympathetic to his new patient, who seldom ate and seldom went outdoors. The doctor encouraged him to go to parties, although there were very few parties the man could go to wearing a white tie and tails.

'I'm cursed,' the patient said. 'It's a trap.'

The doctor smiled. He had a beautiful, noble face. The patient felt he could have kissed that man without any shame – and he knew he wasn't queer. He felt safe in the doctor's presence.

Doctors are the most practical of men, and psychiatrists the most practical doctors. They deal in the obscure but make it obvious, and they treat it with common sense. They argue on behalf of the patient. They are the friends we all ought to have for nothing. They take their time; they are slower than lawyers; they have a kind of selfish patience. This Dr Colquhoun listened, saying very little at first. When he did speak he said sensible things, such as, 'There are no curses. There are no traps, except the ones we make for ourselves. Your future is up to you. Don't confuse debts with faults. Life can be messy, but you don't change it by worrying –'

Clichés of that sort had a calming effect.

'My ancestors are in the history books,' the patient said.

'My ancestors wrote those books,' the doctor replied.

'But I'm a lodger in Mortlake!'

'Barnes is right next door to Mortlake.' The doctor lived in Barnes.

The patient talked about his family, his feeling of having lived under a curse – the instincts that went with his title. He was burdened by having to be this person without being able to accomplish anything. He said that sometimes he felt that he was the only man in Britain who did not believe in a hereditary title. It was as silly as a belief in reincarnation! What was this naive trust in a family name?

But when the doctor mentioned friends, the man said, 'I have none,' and when he mentioned working-class people, the man said, 'I hate them.' He told the doctor that

he could not help feeling the way he did – he had been born like this.

‘As if you were born somewhat malformed?’

‘No,’ the man said, ‘as if I were born perfect. As if everyone else were malformed.’

He could see that this shook the doctor a little.

The patient said, ‘I’ve never said these things before to anyone.’

‘I’ve never heard them before,’ the doctor said.

‘Perhaps they don’t matter.’

‘Of course they matter!’ the doctor said. He was indignant, in a sulking, aristocratic way. Some of these Scots were frightfully grand.

‘But what can I do about it?’

The doctor said, ‘You must tell me everything.’

The rest was bleak. It was the man incapable of making a friend or finding a job or paying the family debts. It was the humiliation of being weak and exposed, like a dream he had of finding himself naked in a public place. He despised people for their common-looking faces and the careless way they spoke. Seeing them eat made him sick. He could not bear to watch anyone eat, he said. And there were sights just as bad – watching people blow their nose, hearing them laugh, seeing their underwear on a clothesline. And he hated seeing their old shoes.

The doctor said, ‘I think I know what you mean.’

He told the doctor everything. He felt much better as a consequence. He knew now that he could not change his situation, but talking about it made him feel less burdened. It did seem at times immensely complicated; but he was not imagining the curse – there really was a curse on him. It was a curse to have to live like an average man. He felt like a fallen angel, for wasn’t this poverty truly like a fall from grace?

These visits to the National Health psychiatrist became his life – the life he had been born to. This was enough society for him. The doctor was, of course, an aristocrat. He was intelligent; he was a model of refinement. The way he smoked cigarettes convinced you he was a deep thinker, and very neat and economical. In a world they knew as squalid and unequal they faced each other as equals, and often at the end of a session the doctor offered his patient a glass of good sherry.

Warmed and made optimistic by the wine, the patient could forget the curse of the family name that had hobbled him so badly. Now it did not seem so cruel that he had been born an aristocrat. He had found a way out of this trap. The doctor was his social equal! And the doctor was excellent company. This wasn't therapy or the confessional feeling of well-being. This was like meeting for drinks.

'We have a great deal in common,' the patient said, and was pleased.

'A very great deal,' the doctor said, after pausing a moment. He seemed reluctant to admit it, and said no more.

'Before I met you, I didn't know which way to turn. I used to think about killing myself!'

'How do you feel now?' the doctor asked.

'I feel I have a friend who understands.'

'None of this has ever occurred to me before,' the doctor said. He went on to explain that he had never thought much about the burden of the past, or upholding the reputation of an old name, or the snobbery-nausea, an instinct that was the worst curse of all.

'I'm glad we met,' the patient said.

The doctor did not reply. In recent weeks he had seemed somewhat inattentive. Now and then he was late for his appointments with the patient. Often he cut the session short; sometimes – though rarely – he did not show up at all.

But it did not matter to the patient that the doctor no longer offered him common sense as advice, or that he fell silent when the patient spoke and remained silent long after the patient was finished. It seemed to the patient like perfect discretion. They really were frightfully grand!

His satisfaction was that, having told the doctor everything, he felt well. It was much better than confession, because each time it had become easier – there was less to confess.

There was no cure, but the humiliation, which was painful, could be eliminated. They had met as doctor and patient on the National Health, but they recognized each other as gentlemen.

The patient's depressions ceased altogether. The following week the session was canceled. It was one of the doctor's no-shows. He was ill – that was the story.

It was a lie. The doctor was dead.

The Times obituary was three inches: THE HON ALEISTER COLQUHOUN, it said, PIONEER IN MENTAL HEALTH.

‘He hanged himself,’ Sir Charles Smallwood said. ‘And that’s why I’m here like this. Under the circumstances, I feel I’m doing rather well, though there are those who doubt it. And sometimes people pity me.’

‘Take no notice of them,’ I said.

‘They don’t bother me a bit,’ he said. ‘Honi soit qui mal y pense.’