

A Prospect of Bliss

by John Bishop

DAVE MOVED HIS CHAIR INTO THE SHADE, feeling the afternoon sun uncomfortably warm on his vulnerable skin. There was no breeze and even the latticed palm fronds hung immobile in the still, moist air. Over the hedge the neighborhood boys played an indeterminate ball game, exercising their limbs and voices equally. From the excited clamor he could identify each boy. Three or four of them were regular callers but Dave knew they would not be visiting again until he relaxed his ban on casual 'droppers-in'. It was not exactly a watertight ban, they leaked through it on one pretext or another but it cut down their numbers to suit a particular guest of his strange hostelry. The empty house was enjoyably quiet in the daytime, but he knew it would quickly return to noisy commotion once his present guest left. If only some happy medium could be found, he thought, to reconcile the present peace and quiet with the reality of being 'Uncle' to a crowd of active, mischievous youngsters. The two states seemed mutually exclusive; either a graveyard or a zoo was his domestic choice, he concluded.

"Mister" Adrian, his current guest, certainly did not like a rowdy gang of boys around him. A quiet elderly man who made few demands, Adrian's visits meant a spell of blessed order and sanity for which Dave was grateful. The title 'Mister' had been bestowed by the excluded boys, and implied a certain wariness and distance inevitable in view of the restrictions they suffered during his visits. He did not spend all of his time alone, however, or even part of it. His inseparable companion was a youth of fifteen tropical summers and winters, the last three of them as a kind of adopted nephew. Privately, Dave felt that this boy, Simon, had been indulged rather extravagantly during that time. Adrian was well advanced in years and each additional one found him sweeter in disposition towards his young companion. Sugar-Daddies were not a novelty to Dave but Adrian could sometimes tend more towards the syrupy end of the spectrum, a devotion Simon evidently considered well justified by his good looks and charming nature. Dave found him more pretty than handsome, with a sleek, well-nourished softness to the lines and curves of his puppyish body. Most of the boys Dave knew were tight and firm to the touch, but Simon had the rounded look of a spoiled favorite. His voice was still high, and could easily take on a wheedling

tone invariably successful with Adrian. He was immensely vain, taking what seemed to Dave a shocking amount of time to prepare for an outing, fiddling interminably with his clothes and re-arranging the curls around his flower-like little face.

A strange choice, Dave decided, though they obviously suited each other. Their domestic life was serene and without the tantrum and trauma that he had become accustomed to over the years. Partly at least, this happy state resulted from Adrian's willing capitulation to the boy's every whim. Simon never visited the house alone; in Adrian's absence he regularly attended school, though without any great distinction there. There were apparently no parents extant, so Simon lived a simple life with his respectable Aunt. She was regularly visited and tribute of various kinds showered upon her. In so far as could be discerned, the friendship enjoyed her sanction and discreet encouragement.

The strains of the journey and the tropical climate had taken a severe toll of Adrian's physical strength, and Dave wondered how long he would continue to make this trip every four months with the odds of his advancing years stacking up so heavily against him. From one or two comments he had overheard, Dave deduced that this could be Adrian's last visit.

The whine of Simon's inconsequential prattle piping his guest's return prompted him to collect up the debris of his lazy afternoon. "Totally sloppy," a female guest had once called him. Bridling at this unjustified slur, Dave had appealed to his friends for support. To a boy their feeling was that, if anything, 'sloppy' was an understatement. Always ready to respond to a criticism, however blatantly unfair, he had bullied the houseboys so that at least the fabric of the place would be less a reflection of his personal failings.

THAT EVENING, DAVE'S MUSINGS took on a sudden relevance, as Adrian sought him out for a talk after Simon had retired to bed alone. They sat outside and Adrian lit a cigar; its pungent fragrance floated on the still evening air.

"You may have realized," he began, "this is probably my last visit. It's more difficult to manage every time. The heat mostly. I can't adjust to it now. If it weren't for Simon I wouldn't have come at all this year. My doctor discourages me, he's probably right."

Dave made sympathetic noises. *I'd* rather die out here, he thought, preferably in the middle of something wickedly energetic. Or just after, now that would be best.

“As one gets on in years the animal desires tend to leave one behind,” Adrian continued, as though reading his thoughts. “For the last few years anyway, I’ve been happy to forget about it. I must admit, life gets much easier as a result.”

Dave remained silent in the face of this heresy. Depravity was a religion for him; he practiced his observances devoutly. ‘Practice makes perfect’ he frequently told the boys.

“I’m making arrangements about Simon. You know I have always tried to keep him away from bad influences. Here, for instance.”

Dave looked as innocuous as he could contrive. It didn’t work. The wolf’s teeth betray the sheep’s coat every time.

“And his Aunt is most careful, I’m glad to say. She feels he would be best in some sort of business; higher education is not called for, to judge from his school reports. I want to apprentice him to a respectable trade and now I think we have found something suitable. There’s nothing like practical experience and working his way up. I’ve offered to help out with his wages, a kind of bribe if you like, so that he isn’t just used as an extra pair of hands and the proprietor has an incentive to train him properly.” He puffed reflectively at the cigar, the smoke curling lazily around them like incense the boys burnt on holidays. “The owner and his wife are a decent sort of couple”, Adrian went on, “He can board with them, and the lady of the house will keep an eye on him. It seems a respectable kind of household, Wilford Wholesalers, they’re called – started by Wilford and he still runs it himself.”

“So it’s all settled,” Dave volunteered.

“Not quite. I can’t expect his employer to bother much about keeping me informed and his Aunt, bless her, simply won’t know. If I am not going to be here, I shall need to know how it’s working out for him. You would be the best person to keep an eye on things for me.”

An alarm bell shrilled out in the back of Dave’s mind. “It’s not that easy,” he said. “I can’t spy on the boy; I hardly know him.”

“I wouldn’t want you to. I trust him completely, What I have in mind probably involves trusting *you* more than him. I want him to come here every month, and give you a report of his progress. Then you write to me. His letters are never very revealing; I want to know as much detail as possible and he writes in a very predictable and formal way. Asking him to come *here*, even once a month, might seem like madness after being so careful about him in other respects, but I rely on you to keep his visits free of incident, if I can phrase it like that. He is very innocent; it may be an old man’s fancy, but I would like him to stay that

way for the time being. I hope you don't find these observations annoying?"

"Not at all annoying", Dave replied. "Not at all my type", he thought.

"Good. You could have been the weak link in the chain. I must have some way of knowing how he is getting on. I feel much better now we have talked it over, and understand each other. The Wilfords are just the people to keep him on the right path".

Dave was vaguely familiar with the anglicized name. He had seen it on the firm's vehicles. Wildly decorated and suicidally driven, they careered past the house from time to time and were often pictured in the local paper; wheels in the air and loads scattered across the countryside while they reposed in a ditch or the middle of a field or the bottom of a precipice after attempting to defy one or other of the laws of physical science. Mrs. Wilford was often to be seen in the same papers donating this or opening that, wherever the flashbulbs popped and the maximum press coverage was assured. The irresistible lure of evident wealth and manifest beauty attracted the more simple-minded journalists, who gave her rather more courage than the altruism of her causes strictly deserved. Of Wilford himself, Dave knew nothing.

Adrian finished his cigar and rose to leave. "It means a lot to me to know that he's doing well and leading a decent life. I hope it won't be a nuisance for you."

"Not at all," Dave assured him. After Adrian left, he sat alone listening to the sounds of the garden and enjoying the slight breeze rustling the tops of the trees in the darkness. There was a promise of rain in that gentle stirring. Fireflies edged the pathway and flashed eerie green Morse at him from the trees. Bats swooped in the light from the windows. A large lizard slithered awkwardly across the unkempt lawn.

If there is no sensual side to this equation, Dave wondered, surely Adrian could have stayed at home and found any number of deserving boys to involve himself with? There was no secret about the motivation of most of Dave's guests. Though not exactly applauded or encouraged in this society, they were not considered objectionable. More likely to be the subject of bawdy humor than outraged complaint. And if a boy became notorious he could expect to have his wings clipped by his father, nothing more. Wings grow again. It was never an emotional issue here. There was no Generation Gap and the intimacies of such friendships would never come to light. For these important differences many men will cross the globe, Dave reflected, but for Adrian there was

no such rationale. Could it be, he wondered, that even manifestly innocent friendships had ceased to exist in these advanced civilized places? That all access to young people had been proscribed, even for harmless old buffers like Adrian? On his own infrequent visits abroad, Dave noticed that young teenagers often inhabited a strange insular world of their own, isolated from every other kind of humanity, often living and behaving like creatures from another planet. Resentful, alienated, sometimes violent in their exclusion, they seemed to have been abandoned by all of society. They roamed in gangs composed exclusively of their own kind, and were seldom seen in any other sort of company. He knew of exceptions, but they were rare and kept a dark secret from parents and peers, swathed in a blanket of deceit and even fear. Presumably this kind of arrangement was as unattractive to Adrian as it was to Dave, and explained the sacrifices he was prepared to make in order to experience a more humane alternative.

Mentally, Dave sighed for all the desolate youngsters Adrian might have befriended in easier times, turned his back on the vibrant darkness, and closed the house up for the night.

ADRIAN AND SIMON LEFT A FEW days later, Simon promising to call by in a month and give a full and accurate account of his new life. The ban lifted, the boys came back. After a month's peace, the cook's voice again heard in the same old tirade against pilfering boys in the kitchen, counterpoint with their fervent denials and guilty laughter. They are *all* guilty, Dave thought to himself.

However honest a boy may be otherwise, Dave had discovered, food is always implicitly excluded from any consideration of morality or proprietorial privilege. For a boy, food lies in a unique no-man's-land, not quite as unencumbered with ownership as sunlight or fresh air or berries in the hedgerow, but somewhere between them and things like soap and toothpaste which have an ownership however general and diffuse. Food evidently belongs to whoever has it in his mouth. Though many had been tried, no means had yet been devised to provide security to food in the vicinity of growing youngsters. Nature was on their side; gut-felt certainty in their multiplying cells of the essential justice of their wants and needs, affording them more cunning, more ingenuity, more patience and more determination than any forces ranged against them in unequal struggle for possession. Only a limited 'Damage Control' operation was possible in the face of such implacable opposition.

The cook, understandably, saw it differently. In his opinion any boy

caught dishonestly appropriating food to his own purpose and for his own ends, willfully denying the rightful owners the benefit thereof, must be punished with the greatest severity imaginable short of permanent injury and henceforth never again allowed into the house. As this policy would inevitably lead to a life of well-nourished but total isolation, Dave refused to countenance it. At a pinch he could do without food, but without boys...?

He enjoyed hearing the battle resume with full vigor, the parties evidently refreshed and regrouped after their long truce. Caught in a cross-fire between the warring factions, a cheese had sustained serious damage and was but a pale shadow of its former self, to judge by reports from the Front. Hardly surprising, Dave thought, they haven't even seen cheese for a month.

FOUR WEEKS LATER, ALMOST TO THE DAY, Simon returned. Dave banished the curious boys to the garden and laid out a pen and paper to record the interview for Adrian. Simon sprawled on the settee with a cold drink and described his life at the Wilford's establishment.

It was no bed of roses. Cleaning the huge rambling warehouse was his main occupation, and more recently supervising the loading of sacks and bales onto the aging fleet of colorful vehicles. At night he slept on a pallet in a corner of the store redolent with aromatic merchandise, trying not to imagine the rats he could hear all around him in the darkness. He ate in the Wilford's kitchen, and bathed at a well in the rear of the premises. It was a hard and uncomfortable life, he complained, and he almost walked out after a rough scolding from one of Wilford's aids for a trivial sin of omission. "Ask Adrian to find some other work for me," he pleaded. "I can't keep my clothes nice or go out or anything, except on Sunday and even then I have to get back to sleep in the store. These are the only nice clothes I have left. Tell him to send me some money for jeans. I can't keep on with this work, Mr. David. It's too hard for me."

"No friends there? No other boys?"

"One other boy. He asked to borrow my watch, the one Adrian gave me. He doesn't come to the store anymore. Now I will have to get a new watch," he added miserably.

Later that evening, Dave wrote a less pessimistic account to Adrian. Give it another month, he thought, it might be too early to write it off just yet.

AFTER THE SECOND MONTH THERE WAS a noticeable change

in Simon's attitude, and even his appearance. The long jeans he had always worn were gone, replaced by a cut-down version that left his pale legs bare and clung tightly to his hips. His situation at the warehouse had improved. Oddly, the change had begun shortly after he tore the knees out of his jeans and had to cut them down into shorts.

"Very strange, Mr. David", he confided, "Mr. Wilford wanted all the empty boxes up on the cupboard. There is a small ladder in the stores for this. So I started to get the boxes and put them up there. The ladder is very old, so when I was up it he put his hand here, on my leg, to stop me falling off. The next time I got up the ladder he put his hand here. Then here! Then when I was coming down the ladder his hand was staying still. You know? When I was staying still on the ladder his hand was going up and down. Then it was two hands. Then when I was going up and down the ladder his hands were going up and down my legs and the ladder was going up and down the warehouse! I thought I really would fall off: it's very tickly with hands up here, you know."

"I suppose it would be."

"Then he said that's enough boxes, so we stopped. He was very hot and had to sit down. I don't know why – I was carrying the boxes. He asked if I liked working there, so I had to say yes, only I didn't like sleeping in the warehouse. Then he said it was terrible, and he would try to find somewhere in the house for me to sleep."

Simon stopped and took a drink from the glass at his elbow. He seemed uncertain how to go on. Dave was a little surprised at his innocence, which would be understandable in a Western boy his age, but was rare out here. Obviously Adrian had been right about this. He let the boy find his own words.

"So then I moved into a little room at the back of their house. It's a nice little room, I have had it for two weeks, now. There's a door into the garden so I don't have to go through the Wilfords' part of the house to come in and out. They have an old cook, and her room is like mine but on the other side." Simon stopped again.

There must be more to this story, Dave thought. "How do the Wilfords like the new arrangement?" he asked.

"I don't see Mrs. Wilford. Wilford likes it, I think. Sometimes he brings me cakes. It is very funny. Sometimes in the evenings he comes with the cakes on a tray. He puts the tray on the table, and sits in the chair to talk. When I go over to get a cake, he strokes my legs again. I think he likes legs," Simon explained. He took another drink. "At least it started like that."

Dave laughed. "I don't think we had better write all this to Adrian."

"Will he be angry?" Simon asked. "He put me in there."

"He might be surprised. Depends what's happening. You haven't finished, I think."

"No. Well, last week Wilford came in the evening with cakes again. I had a shower earlier, and only had my sarong on. I thought that would stop the hands, but it didn't at all! While I was standing at the table eating, the hands went all over inside my sarong. All over! Up here to my waist and everything. I was wriggling a bit, and it was tickling, and you know a sarong is just a bit of cloth really, and I had two cakes in my hands, so it came loose and fell down. I couldn't stop it! There I was standing like that. He said, "Oh, you are beautiful," and didn't tell me to get dressed again, so I just stood there eating. He asked me to leave the sarong off, so he could look at me. It was strange at first, but then I forgot about it, except when he was stroking me. Sometimes he just sat and looked at me, talking about the business and himself, and me, and all sorts of things. He can tell very nice stories and jokes. Before he went that night he came over and sat next to me on the bed, and kissed me instead of stroking. I just lay still. Well, not all of me lay still, you know?"

"I can imagine."

"When I got up to get a cake – there are always lots of cakes – he said it must be difficult to walk around with that thing banging against the furniture and breaking the windows and so on. He talks like that sometimes; very funny. When I lay down again he said he would rid the room of this dangerous monster that had come out of nowhere to threaten us both, and he laid down by my side and put his head on my stomach, like this, I think, and I'm not sure how he did it exactly, but it all happened very quickly anyway."

"Did you like it?"

"I don't know. I wasn't thinking like that. I don't know what I was thinking then. *Now* I like it, because I know what is going to happen, but then I didn't know and I was surprised about it. Then he didn't come for three days, and I thought I must have upset him and there would be no more cakes ever again, but then he came and stayed longer, and it was much better because I was ready for it. It wasn't my fault he hadn't come; he can only come when his wife is out, he said. I suppose he gets lonely without her and comes to see me."

"How do you feel about the job now?"

"Maybe it's not so bad. Wilford spends more time with me, but he

does talk about the business, and I don't have so much cleaning work to do any more. I like the room. He says he will buy me a pair of jeans to make up for the ones that got torn. Strange that he will buy me jeans when he is mostly interested in taking them off me!"

"You don't mind any of that, then?"

"No, I don't mind it. It's nice, really. I always thought I was sort of fattish, but he says I look very nice. Without clothes!"

In his letter to Adrian, Dave confined himself to remarking that Simon appeared to be in capable hands, and was more appreciated by his employer than at first. Surely, he thought, there can be no point in flustering Adrian with lurid tales of cake-induced nudity on quiet evenings.

A few days later he found himself face to face with Wilford at the local hardware shop. He was haggling over the price of a bucket, successfully, to judge from the shopkeeper's responses. Dave noticed that he was certainly much older than his pretty wife, but the cheerfully wrinkled face had a rogue's charm and his eyes were bright and alert with intelligence and even cunning. He was built to a slim, spare pattern; his wiry frame and dark skin the perfect complement to Simon's soft curves. No doubt he could easily charm an impressionable youngster, Dave thought, but the knowing good humor and self-assurance hinted at a more worldly disposition than Simon's ingenuous account of him. Dave had expected a soft-hearted grandfatherly type; this keen, fit, clever old rascal jarred those preconceptions.

BEFORE SIMON'S NEXT VISIT, DAVE DECIDED that he should at least hint at the avuncular closeness that had developed between the boy and his employer. Nothing that would cause alarm to Adrian, but just enough to enable Dave to escape trouble and recrimination if Simon's talkative nature revealed the whole affair some time in the future. The difficulty lay in gradually introducing this element without precipitating a flurry of telegrams and Simon's dismissal. When a month had passed without any sign of the boy, Dave's apprehensions began to grow, but eventually Simon arrived to set his mind at ease. He had been busier than usual and unable to arrange the time off before now, he said.

Dave listened to the predictable report of Wilford's Byzantine business procedures, half-hoping that no further revelations of his equally Byzantine private life would emerge. However, Simon had something to say about that, and eagerly launched into it as soon as the formalities were over.

“Wilford wanted to go out of town and sort out some business. He said I should come as well, to learn more. We had to stay in a hotel and come back the next day, so I took my sarong, but I never wore it. The hotel was a small place, and he knew the people there so we got good food and everything was very nice. His hands were stroking me under the table, so I knew he wanted to be alone with me. When we got to the room, though, there was only one bed for both of us to sleep on. I knew there would be some playing around, but I think he must have done every single thing with me that night!”

In one night? Dave thought. Difficult, even for Wilford. “What kind of things?” he asked.

“Everything! It started out very nicely, like in my room, but when we were both on the bed it got more and more. First he was kissing and stroking, and that always wakes me up here, and he does things with his mouth and his tongue to help it. I try to keep it going as long as I can, but it's never long enough whatever I do about it. Then he said I could try with him. I did, but maybe I'm not good at it yet, because it didn't finish for him, and anyway his hand was round my back, doing things to me with his fingers. He had some kind of ointment or something on them, and I kept jerking and stopping, because it felt very strange. I asked him what he was doing, but he said to try and ignore it. Well, it was difficult but somehow I managed to let it happen without jumping around. That went on for a while, then he said we could try something else, as I really didn't know how to do it with him. I was glad, because I had got tired of lying on my side. He said to stretch out on the bed, and relax. Then I found out what the ointment was for.”

“Stomach ache?” Dave suggested innocently.

“That ointment can *give* you stomach ache! He was very slow and gentle to start with; he said I must relax or he can't put it inside me. Then after it got easy he started to push harder and faster. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower. I thought the bed would break or someone would come in! It didn't hurt exactly, but it was very different, and I was wriggling a bit now and again but he didn't mind. I thought he would be tired after all that driving, but he didn't seem to be because he went on for ages; sometimes lying on top of me and holding me, and then raising up so I could only feel what was inside me. He said to tell him if it hurt, so when it started to hurt I told him and he slowed down, but then it stopped hurting and he could carry on. Hours and hours it seemed like, well, it *was*! I don't know how we stayed on the bed all that time.”

He paused to collect his thoughts.

“But we did,” he continued. “Then when it was finished he really was tired, and so was I! He said I was very good, and he liked me so much, and talked like that for a while. He had his arm around me, and it was very friendly because he was so happy and tired. He asked if I was hurting or anything, and when I said no he said we should sleep, so we did. The last thing he said was that it doesn't ache every time, and next time would be easier! I wasn't at all sure I *wanted* a lot of next times like that, but in the morning he bought me a new shirt and said how good I was and I thought it doesn't matter really, and it makes him happy. So happy he was! Singing in the car, and getting me ice cream. I never saw him like that before. I was a little bit sore in the morning but nothing much and it soon went away. I only noticed it when the car went over a bump.”

Simon stopped for a rest, and poured out a drink of frothy orange juice, into which he dunked a biscuit. It promptly disintegrated, the pieces sinking slowly to the bottom of the glass. Undeterred, he stirred it into the drink. Dave mentally revised the letter he was intending to write that evening. Perhaps a discreet silence might be better after all.

“Now he comes nearly every night,” Simon continued, “and he gave me a cassette recorder for my room. I think he will have to buy a new bed before long, the old one won't stand too much of that kind of thing. He is teaching me other ways to do it and sometimes it takes a long time. He says I can sleep in the mornings to make up for what I lose at night. I haven't been into the warehouse for days now, because his wife has been at her mother's a lot and he has plenty of free time. When he is out I have the house to myself, and play the cassette recorder as loud as I like. The old cook complains about it, but he says I can do what I like there. He got me a new chair as well, but you can't sit in it. It slopes the wrong way and you slide off!”

“Can't you repair it?” asked Dave, privately relieved that the subject was exhausted.

“It's not really *for* sitting in,” Simon said with a disarming grin. “It's a special chair. He got it after we had tried out all the other things, and broke the old chair. He is very pleased with it; he made it himself out of another chair and changed it to how he wanted.”

“I suppose you sort of bend over it?” Dave asked, fascinated.

“Oh, no. That's for the bed, and sometimes the table. I sit in the chair, or kind of lean back into it. It has arms here, like this.” He contorted himself over the edge of the settee, indicating with his hands the position of various supports and contrivances. It looked very

uncomfortable, and a bit pointless.

“But where do you put your legs?” Dave asked.

“Up here.”

“Good Lord! How?”

“Well, the arms come out this far, and they have sort of knobs on them. I hook my legs over there. It all slopes forward, remember, it's not like an ordinary chair unless you put something under the front of it so you can sit down.”

“All right, so you are like this, with your legs here. Where are your arms?”

“It comes up behind my head. I reach round it with my hands, there's a special bar there to hold on to.”

“Good God! Wouldn't you just slide off it?”

“Oh, no. It slightly turns up, just at the front edge. I can stay on. My arms and legs help as well, and he is kneeling in front of it, here, so I can't possibly fall off.”

“So then what happens?”

“What do you think?”

“Doesn't he get tired?”

“That's the clever part of it. He likes to start here, and then lie on me, so he fitted two more legs to the back of it and when he gets tired of kneeling down he pushes the top of it and it tilts backwards until I am lying flat, almost. There's a stool thing that goes in front of it, so he can lie down, too.”

“You'd break your legs, surely?”

“I take them off the arms, and put them round him. Anyway, it's got a high back; when it's tilted over he can push me along a bit so I can put my legs where I want to. Then the top piece is a pillow, see? It's quite comfortable. At one time it must have been a very expensive chair; it's very well made and padded all over. After he sliced the front legs off it and made the back tilt more and fitted the extra legs and the handrail and the knobs and so on you wouldn't recognize it.”

“A collector's piece, obviously.”

“There are still problems with it. Sometimes when he has had enough of kneeling over me, he lifts me up a bit and moves us onto the bed. He tried fitting wheels to it, so that we could work it across to the bed and slide off that way, but it moved backwards all the time and he couldn't stop it going everywhere. He prefers it to anything else, though, because he can feel me all up and down at the same time and kiss me and things like that. He's very clever, isn't he?”

“Fiendish. What does Mrs. Wilford think of these peculiar alterations to her furniture?”

“I don't think she knows he's got it. I see her sometimes now, because I am not working in the daytimes. She's very nice. She thinks I am doing paper work or something like that. She talks to me in the kitchen when the cook is asleep in the afternoons. I don't get on with the cook much anymore. She says I infest the kitchen too much. Mrs. Wilford treats me like a little boy. They haven't got any children. *He* has, but they live with his first wife, somewhere else. Mrs. Wilford is more like a girl than a lady; she ruffles my hair. I don't expect she knows what Wilford is doing in the evenings when she is out. Would she mind much?”

“I rather think she might. You can't be sure. Best not to find out, surely?”

“Oh yes, nobody knows about it.”

“So what do you think about the job now? Are you enjoying being there?” Dave asked finally.

“Oh yes. It's very different now. I don't have any work to do apart from when Wilford comes to see me, and then I really *am* busy! Sometimes he talks about the business but mostly we do other things. I can do pretty well what I want, and that's nice, too. Wilford says I make him very happy.”

Dave wrote that Simon had been elevated to a new position at Wilford's and was also making himself useful around the house in his spare hours. He added that Mrs. Wilford was exercising a motherly influence over him and he was content to stay there. There could be no going back now, he thought. Matters had clearly reached a point where it would be dangerous for even a corner of the routine of Simon's life to be revealed, for fear that the whole truth of it would somehow thrust forward with unpredictable and possibly disastrous consequences.

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS DAVE TRIED out various pieces of furniture with sundry alterations and additions fore and aft, and a cooperative young friend willingly slotted, folded and stretched himself across, around and beneath all manner of bizarre inventions. The results were not encouraging. Peals of hysterical laughter could frequently be heard where there should have been groans of ecstasy. One by one the incongruous items were carried into his bedroom, only to be removed a few hours later, sometimes in pieces, and returned to the garage for improvement and modification. “The search for perfection is never

easy,” Dave told his young friend, who could scarcely conceal his amusement.

“Already you got a stool, two beds and the coffee table for this,” he pointed out to Dave. “Why you want these new things?”

“It’s all a matter of angles,” Dave explained to him. “We have been working in two dimensions; horizontal mainly and vertical occasionally. There’s a third dimension we haven’t tried: the Inclined Plane.”

Success continued to elude him. The boy’s suggestions were verging on the surreal: lights and horns and suchlike, when Dave saw it as a simple matter of between forty-five and sixty degrees off the horizontal with careful provision for the occupant’s extremities. Obviously no further surgery to the existing furniture was likely to produce the required result. It would have to be built from the ground up if it were not to require the services of a contortionist to operate it. His accomplice was very flexible and accommodating, so changing the boy would not solve the problem.

“I would have to *see* the damn thing to work out how the angles should go, and how far off the ground the whole contraption is,” he concluded wearily. Perhaps Simon could be persuaded to lend some expert advice on his next visit, possibly with a demonstration, out of the goodness of his heart and purely in the interests of science. With this cheerful hope, Dave abandoned the project for the time being, much to the regret of his young friend.

As it happened, he never did ask Simon, because events at the Wilford household had taken a dramatic turn in the intervening month. Simon could hardly contain himself, and was visibly excited at what he had to tell. “Start at the beginning,” Dave said, to stem the incoherent babble and reduce it to comprehensibility.

“The beginning? The beginning was in the kitchen. I was eating some bread and jam, and Mrs. Wilford was stroking the back of my head. Here.” He indicated the nape of his neck. “I got the same feeling that I do when Wilford strokes my legs. I had to move a bit to bunch the sarong up in my lap so it wouldn’t show. I think she was looking, and saw what I was doing. She told me to help her move a table upstairs. I had to get up, and I’m sure she could see, even though I was sort of hunched over so it wouldn’t stick out in front. I held the sarong out, but it looked odd. It went down a bit when I was moving the table but then she said she wanted the curtains off the rail so I had to get up on a chair to unhook them. Just like Wilford! A sarong makes it worse, it’s so thin. It was sticking out right in front of her face. When she put her hand on

my leg she couldn't help seeing it there. She said, "You're not such a little boy, really, are you?" and just reached up and felt it through the sarong. When I was getting down from the chair she put her arms around me and hugged me. I was frightened, but *this* was not frightened at all, and poked into her whenever she squeezed me. Then she put me on the bed and lay down next to me and undressed me. Then she asked me to undress her! I could hardly get my fingers to work, so she had to help. Then we were both on the bed and she touched me and stroked me like Wilford does. I was frightened to touch her or even to look at her properly, but she talked to me gently and cuddled against me and told me what to do with my hands. Anyway, I knew, from what Wilford does to me and when I did the same things she really enjoyed it. Then I started to do what he does with his mouth – licking me all over and sucking bits of me, and that was right, too! I tried to do all the things he does to me, but some of them I just couldn't possibly do. Anyway, she liked what I *was* doing well enough. After a while she put me on top of her and moved me with her hands, but it all happened too quickly, I think. She wasn't angry but she moved me off again and put my hands where she wanted them, and then my mouth. She liked that more and more, like Wilford does. Then she kissed me again, and we got up."

Simon was quite breathless after this excited monologue and had to wait before he could carry on. "That night Wilford come to see me and I was afraid she might have told him, but she hadn't and we carried on like before."

"In the chair?"

"On the bed. It was nicer than usual because I didn't finish so quickly. It all lasted longer, I suppose because I had already been with Mrs. Wilford earlier. I cuddled up to him the way she cuddled me, and he really liked that. Usually I just hold him and don't move around so much. I kissed him the way she kissed me, and he sort of shivered all over, and finished very quickly with me on the bed. It was nice. It never hurts now."

"It might hurt if he finds out you have been going with his wife," Dave cautioned.

"I know. She asks *me*, though. I just wait in the kitchen and she comes and fetches me."

"Does it happen often?" Dave asked.

"Every day now. And every night with him! Sometimes twice with him, if she's out. I try to sleep in the mornings but sometimes she wants to see me then, while *he's* out. Sometimes we are all together doing

nothing, and I *know* they're both waiting for the other one to go out. It's crazy! If they knew about each other they could arrange it so I get some sleep. Sometimes it's one after another, with no break almost. I get very tired."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Oh yes. They are both nice but in different ways. I think I might be a little bit too small for Mrs. Wilford, but she likes me all the same. It's just there's so much of it now; this side and that side, this end and that end. Sometimes I don't know what I'm doing!"

"Maybe you should stop it, and leave there altogether," Dave suggested.

"I don't want to do that. It's nice. I get my money, Adrian sends it, and Wilford gives me presents and things. She doesn't give me presents, but I get all the food I want. I don't have any real work to do now. Well, Wilford is hard work, but it's not like *working*. He's always finding some new things. Last night he took all the cream off the cakes and rubbed it onto me and licked it off again. He took so long about it I thought I would explode. In the end I pretty well *did* explode, but he kept me hanging on there until he had finished all the cream."

"Obviously got a sweet tooth."

"Last week it was Art Lessons. That was fun!"

"Is he an artist?" Dave asked.

"No, I am the artist, I suppose," Simon replied. "At least I am the brush. We are making a painting of me, with me. He calls it *The Prospect of Bliss*. We use a proper canvas and oil paints. He puts the paint on parts of my body and I press them onto the canvas. It's not finished yet because one color has to dry before he can use another. We use a different color each time. If you didn't know, you would never realize it was painted like that, but once you *do* know you can tell what all the parts are. So far we have done my hands and feet and my back and front. A few bits of him are on it, too. It looks like blobs of color but you can see where my bottom touched the canvas and the shape of where I was sitting on it and the parts of my arms and legs. He says he can tell the size of all the parts of me from his painting. Some parts we have to do twice, where there are two different sizes? I have to be careful not to press too hard and spoil it. There are one or two hairs stuck to it here and there, but he likes it like that. The worst part is getting the paint off afterwards: it doesn't all come off and the smell is awful. Mrs. Wilford notices every time, but she thinks I am doing some painting for Wilford in the warehouse. That's *nearly* true, isn't it? When

it is finished he says we will keep it forever, and we can always see what I was like at fifteen.”

“Wouldn't a photograph be easier?”

“He likes *doing* the painting. It's fun to do, *and* it's a lot less work than some of the things he has me doing!”

Dave remembered Adrian had told him that one of his hobbies in retirement was oil painting. This reminded him that the fiction of his reports on Simon's progress and the increasingly bizarre nature of the reality had separated into a yawning chasm. Therein lay a real danger of trouble. Simon had made a niche for himself, or it had been made for him, and after four months in residence he was occupying a position, indeed a variety of positions, which gave him a comfortable sort of life. He showed no inclination to change it, which was understandable. However, this was certainly not what Adrian had in mind, or what he was paying for. On the whole, Dave felt, he was caught in a trap of his own devising. To reveal all now would expose him to recriminations from all sides and just possibly destroy Simon's chances of growing through his phase of attractiveness to the Wilfords on one level, and moving into a more useful and productive one.

“You must try to learn about the business. You seem to have forgotten all about it. None of this other stuff is going to help you later on. Wilford might get tired of you, Mrs. Wilford could find someone a bit older and more to her taste and if you aren't useful in some other way they could bounce you out on your painted behind. Have you thought about that?”

“Not really,” Simon replied. “I know quite a lot about the business already, though. What I want to be is a contract driver, with my own van. Wilford has to pay them well, and after a few years they can start to take their own things around as well as his and then gradually get bigger. He doesn't like it because they take away some of his business, but he can't stop it, he says. That's how to start off.”

“Would he let you do that, when you are old enough?” Dave asked.

“I don't think so. He hates them. Every so often he tries to starve them out but they hang on until he hasn't got enough vans and he has to use them again. His own drivers are not as careful as the ones who have their own vans or lorries, and he gets lots of accidents and breakdowns.”

“You won't be old enough to drive for a few years anyway. You should be learning as much as you can now. In between your other duties, naturally.”

“I do try, but it is not so easy to find the time with both of them to

see to! I know enough, I'm sure. I could get a friend from my village to drive for me, and I could go like a van boy until I am old enough to drive myself."

"Where on earth could you get a van from? Adrian wouldn't buy a fifteen-year-old a truck! Forget it. Concentrate on learning it thoroughly while you have the chance."

"All right! All right! I'll learn *even more* than I know already. *And* I'm nearly sixteen now, not fifteen."

Dave wrote a cautious letter to Adrian, carefully picking his way across the landscape of Simon's life, which appeared to him to be turning into something of a mine-field. 'Simon's talents are now appreciated by the entire household,' he wrote, 'and in his spare time he has taken up painting in oils, with Mr. Wilford's encouragement and support.'

"CREAM CAKES?"

"Well, not very many, but as creamy as possible."

"Cream cakes!"

"Maybe not even real cream. Artificial cream? Some kind of topping, you know, something whipped up."

"Dave, you know what happened to the cheese. In *this* kitchen you want to keep cream cakes?"

"Well, the cakes aren't really very important. Perhaps you could just get the topping. You're the cook, you could make a topping. Something soft. Creamy. Sweet. Not too sweet, though."

"How much topping you want?"

"Rather a lot, I should think. Yes, quite a lot. Never mind the cakes, just make the topping. A big bowlful; a *huge* bowlful. As quickly as possible."

"*What for?* The boys will get it. They'll get it all over them! What you going to do with this cream and topping? What you going to *top?* You going to put it on the furniture? What's left of the furniture. Who's going to watch it night and day?"

"I just thought it might be rather nice to have some topping around the place," Dave said lamely.

The cook's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You want jam in it?"

"Yes," Dave said, "why not?"

"Hah!" the cook exclaimed triumphantly. *So that's* what you want it for!"

Dave did not respond.

"What are you going to *do* with the topping?" the cook pleaded. He

hated mystery. Mystery meant surprises. Surprises were unpleasant. "I'll make a nice chocolate cake with a *filling*. A chocolate filling. You'll like that," he suggested.

"Yes, make lots of filling and keep it separate."

"No! Then you take it out and *do* something with it. I'll put in nuts and raisins, and, *inside*, a chocolate cream filling. *What you going to do with my filling?*"

There was an edge of panic to his voice. Dave decided to retreat. "Chocolate cake would be very nice. With all the extras, just like you always make it. Delicious!"

The kitchen seethed with suspicion and outraged curiosity. This is not the time, Dave thought. He beat a prudent retreat to the garden, leaving the cook to mutter under his breath and offer an unnecessary degree of violence to a hitherto harmless carrot.

A few days later Dave was surprised to see a photograph of the Wilfords in the society page of the local newspaper. Mrs. Wilford looked her girlish best, and Wilford had somehow been persuaded into a formal suit and tie. Despite his evident discomfort, he wore an engaging grin. 'Socialite's husband reveals sensitive streak' ran the caption. Dave read on.

Youthful socialite Shirley Wilford was as surprised as her guests when husband George chose the occasion of her Raccoons Club Dinner Party to reveal an unexpected side of his talented nature.

Though far from retirement, George has been whiling away his leisure hours with pallet and brush. The result, a large canvas entitled *The Prospect of Bliss*, is dismissed by George as 'just a bit of fun' but attracted admiring attention from Shirley's guests.

The Minister of Highways, a keen art lover, praised its 'childlike freshness and imaginative use of color and technique' and the architect Sommers Rayn enthused over the 'innovative blend of nature and the material world' he detected in the painting.

George's timing in making known his new hobby at Shirley's party is appropriate, as the proceeds go to purchase the First Prize in the Painting Competition for the inmates of the Fenton Lane Hostel for the Blind.

The prize, a 20-inch color television, will be presented by Shirley to the lucky winner later this month.

The Wilfords are pictured in the hallway of their luxurious

home, where George's painting has pride of place.

Dave looked again at the photograph. Yes, there was *A Prospect of Bliss*, or at least part of it. Dave thought he could make out the shape of a small hand, and perhaps a youthful foot, but no other salient detail could be discerned. 'You wicked old devil,' he thought, 'no wonder you're grinning like a Cheshire Cat.'

"PUT SOME ON MY CHEST," the boy said. Dave made two little circles around the lad's nipples. I could write a book on nipples, he thought. Some boys had nipples like tiny craters with a pimple in the middle; some only the pimple. Some boasted miniature breasts, jutting out cheerfully, begging to be tickled or fondled or circled with a tongue or finger. A boy might have one of each for a while. Boys were apt to discover lumps in one or both, and come secretly and worriedly asking him to investigate. The lumps were invariably temporary phenomena, connected in an unknown way with the mystery of adolescence. In a month they would be gone. Nipples that were pleasantly erogenous before an orgasm suddenly became unbearably sensitive afterwards, the mere threat of a finger or lips descending towards them creased a boy up with apprehensive laughter. To get the best response out of a boy's nipples, Dave had discovered, required the lightest of light touches, the merest whisper of a caress, the gentlest flick with a tongue.

"Now down here." Another little circle appeared around the dimpled navel. Now these things are quite different, Dave thought. They could be treated with a certain firmness. There should be a definite force behind the tongue, pressing into the relaxed stomach to describe a wide circle around the depression and working elliptically into the center. Concave or convex, oval or round, the navel's response was the same. Tilt the ellipse downwards and the circling tongue sends a shiver of visible joy through the boy's body, stirring him into tumescence. Tilt the ellipse to one side and get a squirm and squeal of helpless laughter; very useful for calming the nervous or unsure. Dave squeezed the old-fashioned icing bag he had purloined from the kitchen and piped a thick pink oval around the top of the navel and down to arc across the topmost edge of the little tuft of soft black hair. He made the piping thicker there, changing the nozzle from the classical corrugations to one that produced a tempting scallop. "Tickling!" the boy said in a hoarse whisper, tightening his stomach muscles as the nozzle approached.

There was a sudden furious hammering at the door. "Mr. David!

Mr. David!" a voice was shouting. The boy sat up on the bed and grabbed the icing bag. A spurt of icing shot out of the nozzle and into Dave's hair. The hammering got louder.

Dave put the bag down on the sheet and reached for his clothes. "I hope that door is locked," he said. The door flew open. The boy grabbed the edge of the sheet and rolled over to cover himself with it. A solid jet of icing leapt across the bedroom. Simon was in the room. The boy rolled himself completely into the sheet, pretending to be a pile of laundry.

"Mr. David, I must talk to you. Terrible trouble...," Simon started.

"Wait!" Dave barked at him. He felt himself covered in icing. Simon seemed to notice, for the first time, where he was. His wide eyes took in the improbable scene.

"Go through and sit down and I'll come out in a minute."

The mummy-like shape on the bed began to move, sensing that the danger was past and not wanting to miss any of the excitement. A small face liberally smeared with icing peeped out from one end of the sheet. Simon . watched, spellbound.

"Simon, wait outside for a moment, please," Dave insisted.

"Oh yes. Very sorry," Simon replied, and left.

The sheet began to laugh.

Showered and dressed, Dave stirred a cup of tea while Simon fidgeted. Obviously the news would not wait. "All right, then, but start at the beginning so I can make some sense out of it," he said.

"You saw that picture in the paper about a week ago? I nearly died when he put it up in the hallway, but I couldn't stop it. After the party they left it there; Mrs. Wilford said it is the most awful thing she ever saw in her life, but he wouldn't let her take it down. We had finished it only the day before. I scrubbed and scrubbed to make sure the paint was all off me and I thought I had got it all off. I was still a bit worried, because she had been seeing paint on me for the past week. She asked how I could get paint in those places, and I said it gets on my hands and my hands go everywhere. She laughed at that.

"The day after the party she took me up to her bedroom again. We were on the bed, and she was holding me and stroking me like she always does, and she said quietly, 'Green paint in your toenails and red paint in your hair and blue paint on your elbows – whatever can you be painting that has so many colors? Is it a signboard?' I said it was a small religious thing to bring us good luck. I said that because I was praying to all the gods she wouldn't work out what I *had* painted. I must have

looked a bit frightened because she said, 'Don't worry, I won't tell George you're wasting your time like that. Maybe it *will* bring us luck, and he wastes his own time doing the same thing.'

"At that moment I think she started to work it out. She didn't work it out all at once. There was just something crept into the back of her mind about me painting and him painting and all the different colors. Something about all of that. Then I think it was something about the Green Foot. You know, there is a green foot in the painting. I had green on my toenails. It was like ants."

"Ants?" Dave said.

"First there is one ant. You see it on the wall, and it's just a little ant. Next day there are three ants. Then there are more. After a month your roof falls in because, they have eaten all the wood. Then you see how many ants there are! Well, that day, there was just one ant. Everything was nice in the bedroom and we were both happy. Then the next day we didn't meet, but I saw her standing in the hallway, in front of the painting. She was just staring at it like she was waiting for a bus. Then later I was in the kitchen, and she was staring at me the same way. I started to get a bit worried then. She didn't come down to the kitchen in the afternoon, but I just knew there were more and more ants all over everything.

"A bit later I saw her picking at the picture. Like this, picking at it. I think she pulled a hair off it. Then one day it was gone, and I looked around carefully for it and she had it in the front room by the window. It was flat on a table; I think she had been walking around it to see it from all sides. I just knew she was finding it all out but I could only keep out of her way and hope nothing happened. I couldn't tell Wilford. He was still coming to see me, but always when she thought he was out, or when she was out herself. Once she came to my room. She just looked at everything and went out again. You know, when you do a painting like that the paint goes everywhere, you can't help it. I had enough trouble getting it off myself, let alone the walls and the floor. She just said, 'I wondered what happened to that chair. What *has* happened to that chair?' I said it was broken when I got it and she looked at it, but I don't think she understood it at all. She was really looking at the paint. She was almost finished working it out. Every time I saw her I knew she had worked out another bit of it. I just hoped nothing would happen."

He stopped for breath. Obviously something had indeed happened. Dave's mind was racing ahead to what he was going to say to Adrian. His eye fell on a plastic shopping bag lying next to the settee where Simon was squirming and picking nervously at a shirt button. Dave

knew the bag would contain clothes, and a boy's few possessions hastily packed.

“Then something else happened. Their old cook has got a nephew or someone like that. He's about twenty- five, maybe. She must have told him something. He's horrible – a nasty, slimy person. He got me alone and said he knew about me and Mrs. Wilford. 'Darling Shirley,' he called her! He said he's going to tell Wilford about it. I said please don't, it'll only make trouble between them and for me. Then he said if I give him money he won't tell. I said I don't get paid yet, and most of it goes to my Aunt anyway. How could I give him money? He said get it from Darling Shirley, she's got plenty. He said she would pay up to stop any trouble. I told him I don't see her any more, even to talk to, so how can I ask her for anything? I didn't tell him *why* I don't see her any more.

“He just said get it by tomorrow or there's trouble for you. More money than I get in three months, he wanted. I was very frightened, but after I thought about it I remembered he is not a brave person, and I didn't think he would actually tell Wilford. He didn't tell Wilford, he told one of the men, Morrie. Morrie must have told him, because this morning he suddenly came into my room and asked me, 'Have you been going with my wife? Upstairs in our bedroom?' I was so surprised and frightened I just said yes. He looked at me for a minute, then went out again. She was in the front room and he went in there. I heard shouting. Only he was shouting, she wasn't saying anything. I couldn't hear it properly because he had left the door open when he went in, and I was frightened that if I got too close I would not be able to get away again if he came out quickly. I heard her say, 'At least let's go upstairs. There's no need to tell the whole house, is there?' He was muttering something, but she went upstairs and he followed her. They closed the door to their room, so I could get up close and hear everything they said.

“He said, 'For God's sake, Shirley, what were you thinking of? He's just a boy. Think of the damage this is going to do if it gets around. It's *already* getting around, if Morrie knows about it they all know.' Still she didn't say anything. Then he said, 'Well, he's finished here. They can think what they like. If he's not here it's just a story that'll die out in time. If he stays here there'll never be an end to it. He can go in the morning.'

“Then she said, 'What if *he* talks about it, George? He might if you throw him out.'

“Him? Why should he talk about it? He's not that kind of boy.' Then he thought for a minute and said, 'He doesn't know what he's

saying; they'd only have to ask him and he'd spill the lot. So better to get him as far away from here as possible, as soon as possible.'

"She said, 'It's not all he could talk about though, is it?'

"What do you mean?' he asked her.

"I mean your damn painting for a start. If you think about it, paint sticks to people. Other people can see it.'

"Then there wasn't any talking for a while. I thought they had fallen asleep or something. Then I heard her say, 'I don't care how you painted the damn thing, or why. I've got four brothers and I know what boys are, and men, too. If that boy talks about your painting, George, I don't see much prospect of bliss for us around here. Remember who was here when you threw your little surprise. All those boring old farts, as you like to call them. Well, they might not like to find out what kind of painting they were looking at. If he talks they can check it out easily enough: there are photographs of it in all the papers. Throwing him out is not the cleverest thing you ever thought of. While he's here he won't talk.'

"But everyone else will!' he said. 'They already are. I can't keep him living in this house!'

"What are we going to do?' she asked him.

"I felt ever so sorry for them, David, for her specially. They were all her friends who were there, not his. I wanted to go into the room and tell them I won't talk about it because I like them. If anybody asks we can all say nothing happened. Then she said, 'I know what we can do!'

"What?' he asked her.

"Go down to the police station and tell them he stole a lot of money from us here, in the house. Say we found it on him or in his room or something like that. Get them to lock him up, then he can't tell anybody and nobody will believe him anyway.'

"My knees started to shake and I thought I would fall over right there outside their bedroom door. He said 'Shirley, have you lost your senses? There would have to be a court case. I don't know about you, but I can think of a lot better times and places for this story to come out than that! Remember, he's got that foreigner looking after him, and anyway it's not his fault, it's yours. And mine, I suppose. Ours.'

"Would we *have* to be there, in court?' she said.

"Yes, of course we would. We'd be the evidence. It's a crazy idea. I've sort of got fond of him anyway; I'm not sure he would talk about us.'

"If you threw him out he would. He *might*.'

"We've got to think about it. I can't keep him around the house with

the men talking, it's impossible. There'd be no end to it, it would get worse and worse. Can't just throw him out, that's too dangerous, you say. We don't want to give him any reason to bear us a grudge – not that he does at the moment, as far as I know. He hasn't talked about it in all this time, why should he start now?"

"That's because he's here with us, and we look after him. While he is close to us he won't talk except by accident."

"Right, then," he said, "we have got to find a way that he stays close to us, without being here around the house for the men to laugh about. We have to show him we like him, in case he thinks we don't. I do, as it happens. We'll do something for him to show that we appreciate him not talking about us, preferably something continuous to guard against him letting it out by accident. And," he added, "I suppose *The Prospect* has got to go."

"Then they'll all ask where it is and why we took it down. Lots of people have seen it, George. It's better to leave it where it is."

"All right, keep *The Prospect*. I like it. It's got an imaginative use of color and technique that's rare in a painting, Shirley, the Minister of Highways said so."

"George!" she shouted at him.

"Come on, Shirley, it's not so bad," he said. "What can we do that answers all those points?"

"Send him to America," she said, "if you're sure we can't send him to prison."

"Too expensive. Think again."

"Nothing is too expensive. All the top people in the Raccoon's Club were here. If the Raccoons found out about that painting I would never live it down. What have you done to us? Unveiling that thing in front of the whole Raccoons Club! It was in the *papers!*"

"I could hear she was sobbing in there. Then he said, 'Let's think about it tonight and see what we can dream up.' I thought they might come out of the bedroom, so I went back downstairs. What she said about sending me to prison really scared me, so I got a few clothes and things from the room and ran all the way here."

Simon slumped back into the settee, exhausted.

"That was a bit foolish, wasn't it? It doesn't sound as though you are in any danger now," Dave reasoned, "quite the reverse. What they say is right. They've created a situation they can't live with and they can't send away easily either."

"I don't want to go back there."

“That’s silly. Nothing will happen to you, unless they want to cook and eat you or something like that. You’ve served them well for four months, now you can collect a reward by the sound of it. You will probably have to move out but if you just run away they will be even more worried about it. You should go back and see what they have in mind for you.”

“Do you really think they are going to do something for me? And not send me to prison, or America? Where’s America?” he asked.

“They’ll probably find some way to ask you what you want, without saying exactly why, and get you to promise not to talk about what has been going on there. Think of something they can give you. Be ready for it. Is there anything?”

“I don’t know. I *don’t* want to go to prison!”

“No chance of that,” Dave said reassuringly. “You wait here until you feel better. Have some lunch and then go back and let them work it out for you.”

Simon was much happier after he had rested and eaten. He was obviously apprehensive about returning to the Wilfords’ anxious household but allowed himself to be persuaded over a lengthy lunch. By a strange chance a chocolate cake made a surprise appearance, studded with fruit and nuts and oozing a thick creamy filling. Having placed it on the table, the cook seemed unwilling to leave his creation and hovered anxiously around the doorway. Only when large slices started to disappear into Simon were his unnamed suspicions laid to rest. Residual doubt still lingered in the boy’s mind, however.

“I’ll leave my clothes here,” he said, “and if there’s any trouble I can just run out. If it’s all right I can come back here later and collect them.”

“There won’t be any trouble, but leave them if you like.” Dave watched him disappear down the drive. Maybe they *will* eat him, he thought to himself.

“My cake good?” the cook asked, clearing away what little remained of it.

“Excellent.”

“Couldn’t put any topping. *All* inside,” he said with the merest trace of defiance. “Also, can’t find the icing bag.”

“Ah.”

“You know anything about the icing bag? All the fittings?”

“It’ll turn up.”

There was a moment of strained silence filled with a dense cloud of guilt and suspicion.

“That's a very expensive icing bag. Very old one, can't get like that nowadays,” the cook said in a tone not far removed from menace.

SIMON DID NOT RETURN THAT NIGHT, nor the next. Dave assumed that either the Wilfords had made their peace with him, or done away with him altogether. On the third day following Simon's dramatic visit, he was sitting in the shade by the side of the house when he became aware of a sound percolating through the trees and shrubbery from the direction of the road. A strange unnatural sound. There was an agricultural air about it: a low clanking and growling over which was superimposed the rattle of half a dozen garden rotovators, a lawnmower and a threshing machine. If it's a procession, he thought, there would be drums. He could hear no drums. The sound came closer and Dave rose up from his chair to see what was responsible. As he did so a vehicle of great antiquity and individuality turned into his garden gate and made its way towards the house. All the noise came from this one vehicle, a fact he found difficult to believe. It chugged, clanked, hissed and squeaked its way towards him. He studied it nervously as it approached.

It had an open cab around which ran a complicated fretwork of elaborate carpentry painted in garish colors. Iron scroll-work decorated the doorways and ran across the front of the engine, from which was suspended a multitude of brass ornaments glistening in the sunlight. The cover of the engine was painted with scenes from popular folktales, stained with the oil and grease of decades. Sequins dangled from the windscreen and along the body. Obviously a commercial vehicle; its wooden-framed body swayed dangerously back and fore. As the nightmarish vision drew abreast of the house Dave could see the driver wrestling with an enormous lever similar to those found in railway signaling boxes of a bygone age. This apparently connected in some way with the brakes, as the contraption responded by grinding to a halt in front of him. A choking cloud of black smoke billowed out from the rear of the vehicle, blocking out the light. As it cleared, he could make out the figure of the driver clambering down the decorative ironmongery, and behind him the smaller shape of Simon, grinning from ear to ear. Although the vehicle was at rest the sounds continued from within as it settled into its tires. It had a pronounced list, as though intending to lean against the house. The noise began to die away to a gentle hissing and creaking.

Simon patted the venerable ironwork affectionately. “Mine,” he said, “they gave it to me.”

Dave toyed with the idea of asking him to move it a little further away from the house but abandoned the thought as likely to give offense.

"This is my friend Ari. He's got a driving license," Simon explained. The youth smiled. A cheerful open village smile.

"Hello Harry," Dave responded.

"This is Mr. Wilford's first lorry," Simon said proudly. "He kept it all that time. We had only to put some tires on it and get the engine going and lights and things. The steering was stuck. He says he had three accidents in it when he was starting the business, turned it over, and it's still all right."

"It's certainly very..." Dave began. No other comment seemed to be called for.

"We do contract driving with it, just around here. In the night we sleep in it. The rain comes in a bit. The horn doesn't work, that's the only problem."

"What do you carry in it?" Dave asked incredulously.

"Rice kerosene vegetables sugar cement. That's what's in it now, anyway. Sometimes iron for the welders. I'm saving the money we get left over, because Wilford says there might be repairs to pay for. He knows how to fix it. It makes a profit and I'm learning to drive it. We can't stay long now, I only came to tell you and show it to you and get my clothes."

"Sounds like you're busy these days."

"Wilford says he will always give me work even when he doesn't give it to the others. He likes to see this old lorry working again. Can I get my clothes?"

He followed Dave into the house. When the clothes had been handed over he said, "Those things I told you; you won't tell anyone will you? I promised not to. You have to as well."

"I won't tell a soul," Dave promised.

"And when you write to Adrian, will you say thank you from me, for everything he did? I will come and see you so you can tell him how I am. Tell him about the lorry, but don't tell anything else!"

"I won't," said Dave. "Now that you moved out from the Wilfords', I just wondered..."

"What?"

"About that chair, the Wilford Chair. Shame to throw it away. I was just thinking, rather than burn it or break it up, you could just sling it on the lorry and sort of drop it in up here. I could probably find a use for it, in the garden, maybe. Always use a good garden chair."

“Well, I don't know, Mr. David. I haven't moved out altogether. Wilford says I can still sleep in the room when nobody knows. Just now and again, it makes him happy and he is the only one who can repair my lorry. You could have the paints, if you want. I know we have finished with them!”

“Oh no, no paints, thank you. Forget I mentioned it; no point in cluttering up the garden with furniture, is there? Good Lord, what's that!”

“It's a bit noisy to start up, that's all,” Simon said defensively.

He rejoined Ari in the cab of the lorry, which was shaking and lurching around like a fairground attraction. A great clanging as of an iron foundry at night issued from the belly of it as Ari rummaged through the gears. Dave in voluntarily stepped back a few paces when the ancient vehicle groaned into motion. He watched it careen across the garden and out into the road.

Something twinkled in the grass where the lorry had been standing. He picked it up. It was a bright silvery sequin. He kept it to send to Adrian.