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First edition published March, 1990

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Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf

The Acolyte Press  
P. O. Box 12731  
1100 AS Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

ISBN 90-6971-023-4

# Lost Property

by I. L. Ingles

"Done!" Henry Adler pushed the adler to the back of the table. He could not have gone on another hour without telling someone. Until this week it had never occurred to him, in the whole of his forty years, that he might have to confess he had knowingly become a criminal – not merely in his thought and words, but in his deeds as well. Criminals were semi-morons, a cross between footballers and pop singers or, conversely, financiers with Etonian accents and oily expressions – never schoolteachers with respectable C.V.s and middle-age spread. Now, though fortunately it knew nothing about him, the British legal system and its minions would count him as a consenting lawbreaker – now! when he was already more than half-way though his actuarial existence and, in his maturity, endowed perhaps with more weight than wisdom. It was exhilarating; but suddenly, criminal or not, he had found that he yearned to tell somebody his secret. Such a yearning, he had read, was typical of your genuine felon, and he had decided to confide in Bill Henshaw, the one person he knew to have a heart that was always open and a mouth that would remain shut. Bill and Hetty had probably been wondering why a friend of thirty years' standing had dropped out of sight and mind recently. This letter and others that might follow would reveal all. He would almost certainly get from them an invitation for Christmas.

Henry surveyed his domain. For a bed-sit, it was quite palatial. It was a rectangular room in one of those Victorian terrace houses which are eventually taken over by Harrovian sheiks or stockbroker-belt shekel-shovers. The landlord, a keen member of the moral but far from silent majority, had offered to add Henry to the list of guests who had meals together downstairs, but Henry had declined and imported a Belling stove and fridge and a set of Oxfam wedding-present cutlery. Teachers were not so rich as to buy new utensils for a temporary bed-sit. It was very likely to be temporary. His job was one of those where the boss never knows whether the school will attract too few students the next term or fall down on top of those already inveigled there. It was supposed to be an adult school for English for respectable continentals, minimum age sixteen. Henry's great triumph was that, in only two and a half months, he had persuaded Miss Vancouver to take in Pepe, a big fourteen-year-old Madrileno whose parents were already in the process of failing the

Cambridge Certificate course.

Henry smiled. Pepe was a jolly lad, totally erratic, whose effervescence made daily doses of dogmatic German Lutherans and serious Swiss nurses endurable.

It had all started one Friday afternoon when, having discovered in the course of a lesson with the Spaniards in his shabby, dirty-green classroom, that they had never explored the area round the school, he had suggested that they should join him for a picnic lunch on Primrose Hill the next day. "A good chance to practice your English outside these dingy walls. A brighter shade of green there, too." Pepe had flooded the foyer with cascades of enthusiastic jabbering Castilian which swept his parents' doubtings away without very much resistance.

Saturday arrived dressed like Easter, blue-bonneted and rosy-cheeked. Henry responded by putting on his fanciest and most casual trousers and his free-and-easiest tartan shirt. Out of the sombre chrysalis of Henry Arnold, teacher, there emerged the attractive imago of Hal Arnold, *homo gaudens*, – and he was not the only revelation on the Hill that morning. Pepe had been transformed from a uniform adolescent in dull uniform T-shirt and dull uniform jeans into a paintbox creation resplendent in a brilliant yellow blouse and very short shorts of fluorescent turquoise, from which pleasantly proportioned legs flowed down into a pair of fiery scarlet socks. Under his dark hair and dark eyes, his shining white teeth broke out into a grin.

"We go walkies?" The grin belied his feigned ignorance of the appropriate use of the language that had made a Shakespeare out of a Midlands schoolboy. "We go walkies and have talkies?"

"A talkie," smiled Henry, "was a moving picture which spoke. You, Pepe, are exactly that. You look very smart today."

Pepe whipped a minute dictionary out of a turquoise back pocket. "'Smart: pain, irritation!'" His grin faded. "I give you the pain."

"No. It means you're good to look at. It can also mean that you are rather clever."

Pepe recovered, and was merry again. His parents, netting only an occasional butterfly among the fluttering words, ray-gunned Henry with determined, alien goodwill from the outer space of their malcomprehension.

"To throw, to catch, I throw, you catch," grinned Henry, producing the tennis ball he had squeezed, rather less neatly, into his own back pocket. Pepe charged forward away from him, racing beneath the soaring parabola, completely misjudged the trajectory, but flung himself in a perfect horizontal glide above the ground, and seized the plummeting ball in one splendidly tentacular hand. They repeated the game non-stop for some

time, until Pepe was felled by unconcealable exhaustion. "You should take up cricket," applauded Henry.

"The baseball," smirked Pepe. "I do him in Madrid. Now we are eating?"

The picnic was a success. Henry served his students as ingratiatingly as any Italian waiter – and Pepe's mother was clearly going to make her son's life in the immediate future very difficult. "Your teacher laid the cloth for us very smoothly. Your teacher poured our drinks for us. Your teacher was a gentleman." Henry even felt a twinge of remorse as he imagined the smarts and irritations he must be incubating for the youngster.

They chatted, promenaded, launched out on returning tides of energy into new games of ball, then subsided into lethargic observation of Mr. and especially Miss Primrose Hill carrying out the maneuvers their urban genes had programmed them to perform.

Time passed agreeably. The sun surrendered and, as the afternoon faded, Henry became aware that his every movement was being shadowed, closely scrutinized, and sometimes even copied. He slowed down, letting the Spaniards drift on ahead.

The voyeur, a creature of perhaps twelve or thirteen years, slowed down too. He was of average height, dressed in a gray jacket, gray trousers and gray socks. Henry stopped, and the boy immediately stood still. Henry looked him straight in the eyes. The boy blushed faintly but returned the gaze, unabashed. In his uninvolved-schoolmaster tone, Henry inquired, "Is there something you want, young man?"

The boy smiled – a gentle, rather sad little smile. "I was just watching you and your friends."

"My pupils. I teach them."

The face brightened. "That big boy isn't your friend?"

"Just a pupil. Spanish."

"I'm English, born in London – I think."

"Really?" grinned Henry, "and here was I thinking you were an Iroquois..."

"Red Indians," the boy interrupted smugly.

"Exactly. Very good at tracking the straggling white man. Your accent should have told me you were not part of the brave New World." The boy's vowels were as crisply and congenitally Cockney as the very clappers of Bow Bells. Henry studied him more attentively – hair marxist-red, eyes tory-blue, skin slightly pale, face remarkably oval, eyebrows extremely thick and bushy, arms and legs a trifle thin perhaps

but hard to tell under their gray shard, shoulders rather round but quite broad and prominent, the big bottom most distinctly so. "What's your name, then?"

"The loved one."

"Pardon?"

"David. That's what it means."

"Ah. So who loves you?" The round shoulders sagged, and Henry was sorry for the intrusion. "Well, David, do you live near here?"

"Nearer than Spain is. Are you going home now?"

"Yes. I suppose, therefore, I had better bid you farewell. Be good, my little gray gosling."

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"Henry." He turned, and the boy wandered off.

The little family made its way back to its lodgings but insisted on another picnic indoors as a dessert to the Primrose Hill starter – or, rather, Pepe insisted and his parents added a belated "Por favor, Señor Arnold."

An hour later, encumbered with a luxurious rug on which to lie hedonistically naked before the fire, Henry, back outside the house where he lived and lost in satisfying reflection on the day's delights, turned his key and pushed with one knee to unlock the heavy front door – and was astonished to find himself staring down at a small, gray-cuffed hand which had appeared from nowhere to help him swing it open.

"Does it always have to be railway stations?" Henry asked.

"I'm collecting them," grinned David. "I imagine all the places the trains are coming from and going to. Besides, in buffets it's warm and you can sit down in comfort." He lolled back contentedly.

Henry raised a quizzical eyebrow. "This week Euston, King's Cross and now Paddington. Three others last week." He put on an aggrieved tone. "Do you honestly believe I can afford British Rail prices another three afternoons next week?"

David pouted. "I paid for the doughnuts yesterday. We don't get much pocket money."

"*We?* Ah. Now, look here, David, I'm not going to go on playing this game if you won't tell me something about yourself. For example: what does *we* mean?"

The sad expression Henry had seen before on David's face returned and was made even more wistful by the crude light of the buffet. "The other children and me. It's a home for boys, but I'm not saying where.

You don't trust me enough to let me come to your room, so why should I tell you about my place?" Sweat had suddenly appeared on the boy's cheeks. "If you don't trust me, why do you keep meeting me?"

It was Henry's turn to redden. "Do I bore you, David, or haven't I produced the goods you want? You'll have to do your begging openly. I'm a bit slow on the uptake – Edward rather than Paddington Bear." This was cruel and provocative, Henry realized. In a less overbearing tone he said softly, "Why did you pursue me on Primrose Hill?"

For a moment it looked as if the boy was going to get up and walk out. He wiped a pool of sweat from one eye – or was it tears? He stared at the grimy wall behind his questioner, then took a noisy gulp of tea. At last, with considerable effort, he muttered forlornly, "I thought you were kind. Pepe looked very happy with you."

Henry reflected again that David had spent most of their conversations on previous afternoons drawing information out, never offering it. He now knew all about Pepe, the Vancouver, the renting system for his flat and Henry's distant family. All Henry had discovered was that David was thirteen and three-quarters, a park-wanderer, a train-watcher and an institution boy, obviously searching for affection. In this short time, however, Henry had learned to care about him and to visualize throughout each day that remarkably oval face and the now-understood gray uniform – and to make sure that nothing clashed with their late-afternoon seances. Seances they were, for a strong mysterious force seemed to bind him and the boy together, and it was becoming increasingly painful to part after each further rendezvous. "Do I give you the pain?" Yes, thought Henry, Pepe's words had been prophetic. David had indeed become a pain, a pain in the heart. "I'm sorry, David. I was rude. Forgive me. Will you tell me about your family?"

"Not much to tell. Dad killed Mum and battered me about. They put him away and he died in prison. If there was a death sentence I could have got rid of him quicker. It costs thousands to keep murderers in prison, and that cash could be used to help boys like me." His voice had hardened, but the twinkle soon came back into his eyes, and he grinned. "Then I could always pay for the meals."

Henry shivered filled with horror at the thought that he might himself have added to the bitterness of this boy or might do so in the future.

"*The 17.17 for Hereford will depart from Platform One,*" announced the loudspeaker, cutting like the jagged edge of a tin can into the flesh of their infant intimacy.

"Come on, David, we'll go and wave it off."

They sat on a luggage-trolley. "No one ever seems to be manning the barriers these days," complained David proprietorially. "I could steal all Her Majesty's mail."

"There are some kinds of barriers that are very carefully manned," murmured Henry.

The boy looked up sharply at him, then relaxed, and sighed dreamily. "There's a cathedral at Hereford. It's got fires burning in it. It's my best cathedral."

"You collect cathedrals as well? You must have very big pockets."

David contemplated his trousers. "They are pretty huge," he agreed, the wistful expression coming back into his eyes. A deep flush had spread over his pale cheeks. With a quick glance at Henry, he went on, "Don't know why uniforms have to have such enormous things."

Though David's vowels were unalloyed Cockney, his language was standard bland – unspiced with slang or swearing. Respect for adults perhaps...? "Yes," frowned Henry, "why are you always in this camouflage?"

"We're not supposed to go out in anything else. I'd have to leave you at least a quarter of an hour earlier, if I had to change when I got back, and if I was caught... Boss-man makes us wear it at supper time as well."

"Heavens!" I thought such places had been swept away in the avalanche of progress."

"What do you mean?" A look of defiance came into the blue eyes. "It's not a prison."

"Keep your wings on. I never said it was. How could I, when you've never told me anything about it?"

A whistle blew. David said abstractly, "Hereford's easily best."

"Why?"

"The fires. I hate being cold. If there is a Hell, it ought to be made of ice."

"Hmm. Seems to me you've had enough Hell already."

David opened his mouth to say something, but froze in the act. He was staring at a heavy, florid man lugging a case clumsily along the platform. "No!" Sliding abruptly to the ground, David turned his back on the man, and knelt head-down between Henry's shins, as if searching for a lost coin. The man drew level with the trolley, caught sight of the kneeling figure, hesitated, then trudged on. Just as David knelt up again, the man looked back, shrugged, and continued towards the first-class carriage.

Henry, alarmed by the agitation in the finger gouging into his calves, said curtly, "I've changed my mind. You can come to the house tomorrow."

We'll meet our Waterloo later. Kick a ball about outside or something. As soon as it's safe, I'll come down and let you in. When's your birthday?"

"January the sixth."

"Well, it's just been brought forward. Tomorrow you shall have a feast fit for the sovereign of all North London's gray-backed, gray-breasted and gray-shanked goslings."

Henry watched meditatively as the boy prowled round the room, like a dog sniffing over a new carpet and nosing into unexplored comers. One could grow very fond of dogs... David, having been told he was free to act as Inspector of Bed-sits, was methodically pulling out drawers, opening doors and peering under cushions and pillows. Finally he ensconced himself in the armchair. "Satisfied?" chuckled Henry. "It's definitely not bugged." For some reason he was anxious that this street boy – what else could he be? – should trust him. It was not that David was a replica of young Apollo, nor that he was one of North London's intellectual aristocracy. 'Don't even know if he's from North London,' Henry mused, 'and a Cockney accent proves nothing. Think what's happened to Australia.'

"We get de-bugged twice a year," grinned David. "Gives us two extra holidays. I got Hereford, Ripon and Lichfield that way. Why do you like me so much?"

Henry jumped. The urchin – no, he was too clean for that – this young gosling king-for-the-day was indeed a wise old bird, though whether he hailed from the East was a matter for M.I.5. At no time had Henry allowed himself to express any open feeling of affection for him, other than that which might be explainable in someone caring about lonely people who needed friends.

"Why do you like me so much?" insisted David.

Henry smiled. "I suppose it's because I like the shape of eggs."

"The shape of eggs?"

"Oval. Your face is a perfect example and, as I told you the other week, I am a committed Surrey supporter. It is also the shape of my largest Pyrex dish, now full of rice and curry, to which you once said you were just as committed. Finally, it is the shape of the spoons we are going to eat it with."

David sprang up. "Shape of the evening, beautiful shape!" he shouted – and, darting across the room, sat himself down at the table. "Hereford Cathedral!" he proclaimed, smiling angelically.

"Keep your voice down," said Henry with a frown. "You're not supposed to be here. You sound like Radio One, and this is the



headquarters of the B.I."

"B.I.?"

"British Inquisition."

David giggled, then hissed, "Look, no hands!" And, wrinkling up his nose, he opened out his lips into a superb crimson-on-white montage of the Shape of the Day.

'Chefs specialty,' Henry thought, 'Gamin and egg au sourire... si doux.' His skin tingled. This boy would never be called good-looking and he was not a cultural soulmate, yet he was steadily cementing himself into the fabric of the Arnold way of life. There was something compelling about him, and Henry was afraid of waking up one dreamy afternoon to find himself wallet- and watchless in some British Rail buffet, David gone – and companionship gone with him.

"I know what's missing," exclaimed the boy suddenly from the critic-seat snugness of his requisitioned armchair some minutes after the feast. "I've been trying to work it out ever since I came in. No television."

"Don't like it," grunted Henry. "Cramps the mental processes. Hardly anything left to the imagination."

David grinned his saucy gosling-of-the-world grin. "So, if you couldn't see me, like not having television, you could imagine I was charming and beautiful, instead of..."

"Who said you weren't charming?" Henry found himself replying, "but you're cheeky with it."

"Not beautiful," giggled the boy, "not like a girl, or anything." He pouted, an occasional response which added yet more charm to his attractiveness.

Henry smiled. "Does it matter? Not being a film star doesn't stop anybody playing games or studying or even collecting bits of old Gothic and railway stations."

"What's 'Gothic'? No one's ever heard of half the words you use."

"Do you really hang on every pearl I cast, or have you a photographic memory?"

"Sort of. Anyway, you teachers never stop being teachers."

"And you never take off your uniform."

David flushed. "I do... sometimes." He stood up, bowed low, and ostentatiously removed his jacket. "Besides, we're forced to wear uniform. No one forces you to teachify all day long."

"Or to invite impertinent goslings to come and peck up heaps of curried rice grains free of charge. Grumpy goslings can get their bottoms smacked. It's a big enough target, and you're not too old to get what you deserve."

"There you go, being a teacher again! Anyway, I *have* got nearly everything I deserve – rice, cake, Hereford, and even that funny French Rock-cheese."

"Roquefort."

"There's only one thing I haven't got yet that a charming person like me deserves."

"Oh yes? What?"

"A cup of tea before I go. Ours is like the stale of horses."

"Heavens, the state totters, but its education system has thrown up a budding Shakespearian to save us all. I shall arise and go downstairs now to fetch water to make tea. Stay in here. I don't like problems.

"So you don't like me, then, after all?"

"Foolish birdbrain, you're an enigma, not a problem." Henry wanted to say something soft and sentimental, but could only add, "I'll lock the door behind me, just in case somebody decides to pop his head in." David nodded.

When Henry returned, the boy was nowhere to be seen. Henry glanced under the bed. Nothing but shoes. With a sinking heart he went to his chest of drawers and took out the tin in which he had stuffed the money he had withdrawn for Christmas shopping, more than a hundred pounds. He had been terrified everything would end this way. He checked a second time. Not a penny short. He looked at the window into the fire escape. Unbroken. To use the escape, you had to smash the glass and climb out.

Grinning now, he strode over to the wardrobe and flung open the door. David stood before him, with the smile of a beatific chorister.

"I am the skeleton in your cupboard." Their faces were almost touching. The skeleton was balancing on the deed box which occupied the raised floor of the overcoat section. His nose and mouth were so close that they were like a restaurant ventilator gusting out hot, curry-sweet air into an enclosed alleyway. His lips wriggled into an egg shape. "Mind you don't catch salmonella, Mr Teacher. I haven't been in here long enough to cook properly. Can I come out? I've got something in my eye." He slithered down before Henry had time to step back. "Can you see anything?"

"Only a lonely redhead who wants to be somebody's blue-eyed boy and pretends to be cheeky because he thinks somebody will pay more attention to him."

To Henry's astonishment, David immediately flared up: "I'm not pretending anything, and I have got something in my eye."

"What?"

"A pupil and an iris." David's return to facetiousness was as

astonishing as his explosion of rage. "And there ought to be friends, not pupils and girls, in people's eyes... and ducks!"

"Ducts. Come and drink tea."

David glanced across to his armchair. "What do you do at Christmas, Hal? Will you be staying here?"

Under the light of the lamp-post, Henry read over the note he had just scribbled declining the Henshaw's traditional invitation, sealed it up and flipped it into the greedy mouth of the pillar box – also red and almost oval. He was elated, on top of the Arnold world. Good people though they were, they would have to take second place this year, till after Christmas. Never, since his childhood, had he so looked forward to the 25th.

Henry put down the fish and chips and fumbled for his key. It had been an excellent concert – in the company of his beloved Beethoven and an old teacher friend, but several times Henry had found himself wishing the friend would be magically transformed at a wave of the conductor's wand into a blue-eyed red-head of thirteen years and eleven months. The outing had been a refreshing change from the three R's he normally practiced – records, radio and reading. Now he could look forward single-mindedly to the great day of David's self-invited Christmas visit, less than a fortnight away. It would be the whole afternoon from two till six, instead of the usual ration of forty-five minutes or less.

As Henry pushed open the door, a wave of warm air swirled about his head. 'Damn! Must have left the gas on all evening.' He stretched out his right hand to turn on the light. The switch was one of those misplaced things some demented Heath Robinson architect had positioned over a meter away from the door jamb. Henry's fingers had just located the plastic surround when he realized that the light was already on. He stared at the switch in irritation. 'Lights as well! What on earth was wrong with me?' He turned to close the door.

"Hullo," said David, and pushed it shut for him. "I was beginning to think you were never coming."

Henry leapt back like a startled rabbit. This boy's capacity for astonishing one was endless, it seemed. The fish and chips shot to the carpet. "What the hell are you doing here? It's half past eleven."

David bent down and retrieved Henry's supper, undamaged in its Telegraph-plated armor. "Don't shout. I'm not supposed to exist, remember? I wanted to see you again. Can't wait until Christmas."

Henry gazed at him confusedly. David continued, "It's all right. If

anyone inspects the dormitory, the others'll say I'm in the bog. It always works."

Henry frowned. "Always? You've done it before?"

"A few times. I like wandering around at night. It's pretty. So long as I don't do it on Sundays, I'm quite safe."

"Never on Sunday: your day of rest?"

"Old Lucas is on duty Sundays. That's why it isn't safe. He's a bit... 'found' of me. He might come searching. You know what it's like."

"I merely hazard guesses – I never had the privilege of being a boarder."

David smiled his angel-in-chief smile. "In our place we don't consider it's a privilege. I've brought you a present." He produced a packet of coffee from a pocket of his uniform jacket hanging neatly over the back of a chair.

"Where did you steal that from?" demanded Henry.

David glared at him. "I thought you... liked me." His eyes glistened in the electric light under which he now stationed himself. Surely the wretched boy wasn't going to start crying...

"Do I really give you the impression of hating you?"

"Then you shouldn't call me a thief. I get enough of that. I bought this specially."

"Sorry," mumbled Henry. So, another fragment of the jigsaw had slipped, by chance, into place.

"It says here it's a stimulant," added David soberly. "You don't have heart trouble, do you? You're pretty old."

"Constantly, but not the sort you're worried about. Relax. I shall prepare a feast. We shall eat. You will go. Old Lucas might have swapped duties."

David was examining the packet again and smiling to himself. "Shall I take the kettle out and fill it, Hal?"

"Definitely not, and I shall lock you in while I'm downstairs." A sudden thought struck Henry. "Yes, and how did you get in?"

David grinned. "Apples and pears – just right for filthy little grubs, like they always say I am." He was the complete Cockney boy now. Henry had never heard him use slang words before. The boy seemed to have a shield of polite, official language with which to confront the adult world. It appeared to have persuaded somebody in the same adult world to let him in at the outside door; but what about his getting into this room? David indicated the passage. "Hurry up, Hal. Our supper'll be cold soon. I thought I would get good service in this establishment." Henry admitted

defeat, carried out the kettle, and crept furtively to the nearest bathroom.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr Arnold," boomed a voice at his elbow, as he came back up the first landing, "but I wonder if you could turn your radio down. It's rather late and I could hear the voices as I was doing the rounds." "Sorry," mumbled Henry. "I had no idea." The exemplary-slippered landlord made an ostentatious noiseless descent into the catacombs. Henry climbed up to the Temple of David – or was it, in fact, the den of a cunning little thief? London was full of Fagin's latter-day disciples. Twice in the past year he had been persuaded to donate hard-earned cash to the shining morning-faced school-age boys who, as he must have known perfectly well, had nether lost their return rail ticket to Folkestone nor the family allowance belonging to a desperately feared and vicious child-battering mother. He opened the door, stepped inside, and was struck totally and instantaneously blind. There was no glow from the gas fire and, when he tried the light switch, it merely clicked its teeth disapprovingly and refused to furnish forth. Terrified, Henry turned back into the passage and, to his unutterable relief, found he could still see the light at the corner of the landing. "Damn. The bulb's gone. Little gosling, come and take this kettle while I get some illumination."

Silence. Total silence in total darkness. Henry's heart lurched. All along he had had this apprehension that he was probably being conned. So, it was indeed a den and not a temple. Locking the door, he blundered across to where the chest of drawers should be. In the darkness he counted out his Christmas money once again. To his bewilderment, it was still perfectly intact. So David was not a thief? Then why go to the trouble of turning off the gas? Why come at all, then wait for what had apparently been hours, only to creep away when allowed in? More significantly, the landlord had been on the prowl. Once outside this room, David surely could not have escaped detection.

Henry smiled to himself, now, and stood absolutely motionless, listening. A Trappist mouse could not have concealed its presence from him. Even mice had to breathe – and so certainly did goslings. He glided across to the wardrobe. Mice, moreover, rarely hovered at head height. Noiselessly he rested a hand on the catch, then wrenched open the door – and received the detonating blast of a gargantuan sneeze full in the face.

"Right, you cheeky joker, out you come!" He thrust forward in the direction of the sneeze. His hands met round a pair of naked shoulders, slid down a bare, moist back, and finally came to rest on the nude inevitability of the boy's buttocks.

"St. Michael and all angels," Henry barked. Then, remembering the

sonic-eared landlord, he whispered, "What sort of a joke are you playing this time?"

"Don't call aces jokers," David whispered back, "and I'm not playing." Then, with a throaty little snicker, he added, "And don't hold so tight. You'll break our bulb. Let me put it back."

David blind-manned his way to the fire and turned it on full blast, bathing the room in a soft, friendly glow. Hauling a chair underneath the lamp hanging from the ceiling, he balanced on tiptoe and slotted in the bulb. Spotlit in the exploding brilliance, he posed with arms akimbo and waited for the applause.

Like a double sprig of cherries, Henry's spare keys hung dangling over an inclining right ear. "Not the appropriate uniform, dear boy," Henry said. "Don't you think you ought to put something else on instead? Or there'll be two lots of cod getting cold..."

David looked puzzled for a moment, then blushed and handed the keys to Henry. "Had to get in somehow. Wasn't stealing. I thought you would like me in my birthday suit. The other men do."

"The other men!" Henry was suddenly annoyed. "What other men? And the birthday was last time."

David shrugged. "I wasn't sure about you, even last time." Jumping down from the chair, he ran to the little settee which, Henry now perceived, was littered with bits of discarded gray uniform clothing. David pulled on the trousers and beckoned Henry to sit down beside him. "I thought you... I gave you lots of hints.... like these pockets being *enormous*. Go on, put your hand in."

Henry hesitated for a moment while the blue eyes pinned him down like a captured butterfly. Then he obeyed – and, as he had anticipated, his fingers encountered no protective lining or chaste barrier briefs, but slid straight down into the warm, foliage-fringed lagoon of the boy's thighs. There a shapely catamaran, its mast in the process of being stepped, lay moored unguarded and unmanned. Shyly, David gave him a quick, tentative kiss. "The first man told me to cut the inside out. I met him when I was wandering around one night and he asked me if I would like some pocket money."

Henry leaned forward and adjusted the gas. He had begun to drip sweat in the manner of the pipes and cistern when he was taking a hot bath. David waited until Henry was sitting up close to him again, then continued, "I guessed what he wanted, but I decided to say yes. He put a hand in my nearest pocket and made sure I knew what he meant, and then told me his flat was just around the corner. When we got there, he said, 'An

allowance is better than "pocket" money, so allow me,' and pulled all my clothes off like he was tearing open a parcel. I couldn't stop him, but I didn't try very hard. When you're only just beginning to say yes to men that way, you don't really know how to deal with them properly, and actually I was quite interested in finding out what it would be like. I'd only done it with boys in our dormitory and they aren't very... well, you couldn't honestly call them Tarzans." Henry waited in silence while David ruminated. "I suppose being interested helped me not to be quite so afraid. It was pretty scary that first time with that Piccadilly man. Anyway, he was stronger than you would expect by looking at him, so I gave in, quite quickly. I think it's better to give in when you can't win. You might save yourself getting hurt more. I ought to call him the Paddington man, really! He was the one who came along the platform the day you and I were there and I bent down like this." In a flash, David sloughed off his trousers and, stark naked again, knelt on the floor, with his head buried between Henry's shins.

"Not exactly like this," murmured Henry. It was impossible to conceal the amusement in his voice. "I seem to recollect you had your gray feathers on. Aren't you roasting, with this gas going full-blast?"

"This is a hint, too," came the muffled reply. "You're right. You really are slow on the uptake – and people can't play coffee on railway stations."

"Play coffee?"

"You should always read the instructions on things. It says, 'Strip here' on the packet I didn't steal. You once told me you liked taking all your clothes off when you were in your room."

"Not when there are visitors."

"Oh," said the boy, subdued. "I thought I was..."

"More than a visitor? Come up for air, David. Of course you're more than a visitor. It's only... well, these things take a bit of getting used to." Involuntarily, and with a reflex holding of breath, he stroked the smooth, scorched posterior that had reared up suddenly and disconcertingly between his legs, like the arched body of a sybaritic cat.

A Cheshire cat... David reappeared, grinning delightedly. "It's nice and big, isn't it?"

"No doubt it serves; but, if you don't move away from the fire, it'll finish by being no more than a charred and ruined rump steak.

David stood up tall in front of him. "I don't like people tugging my clothes off. That's why I undress as soon as I'm in their rooms."

"David," Henry demanded fiercely, "do you...?"

The boy had so positioned himself that his pelvis was exactly at

sitting-duck-teacher's eye level. Henry tried again. "Are you a... I mean, is this a regular business?"

"Only when I want cash – or chips. What do you think of this nest of mine?" He brushed his pubic hair lovingly.

"Quite remarkable in someone not yet entitled to sauce, I suppose," Henry said, trying not to sound too impressed.

"Started before I was eleven," said David proudly with a knowing wiggle of his hips. "The other kids are dead jealous. Are you going to play coffee? I'm hungry."

"Woe to my realm, where you are the little king! Go and put the kettle on."

He watched David skipping about, setting the table, discovering the special-guest serviettes of delicate tissue-thin lace, scrupulously dividing the food and efficiently organizing the brewing-up in a kind of bottom-wobbling ballet. Henry knew himself to be blushing like a guilty schoolboy caught breaking the rules. He could feel the truth about himself, the truth so long and cruelly tethered, working its halter free and bearing down on him with lowered horns – but this was no bull from the deep sea of his id. By working as a teacher, he had conscientiously and frequently looked into the field where the bull raged. Deliberately, he had skirted the thin hedges which separated him from its charms and bewitchments – but it had never charged. In all his schools he had been popular, but no boy had ever made advances to him. In this risk-taking metropolitan "countryside" in which his bull was so miserably restrained, he had not even been offered potential satisfaction in return for money.

All at once, as the kettle started to splutter, David stopped displaying. With a worried knitting of his luxuriant brows, he stood gazing down critically at himself. Then, flitting across the carpet, he posed proudly in front of Henry again. "They're pretty oval, too, aren't they? True or false? No pretending." He stared challengingly at Henry but, the eyes which challenged seemed also to be pleading. "Are you really not going to play coffee?"

"Absolutely egg-like and lying in such a lovely soft nest as well. How much do you charge your customers?"

David clenched his fists and pounded at Henry's chest and shoulders. "You bloody thick teacher, you!" Wiping quickly at his eyes, he stalked back to the stove and made the coffee. After this he switched on the tape recorder. "I listened to some of your music when I was waiting. I chose this one." They sat down and let Tchaikovsky entertain them softly in the background. For some time they did not speak. Their



hunger, it seemed, obliged them to concentrate exclusively on the food.

Henry contemplated the tense features, broad but round shoulders and the thin arms and chest facing him across the table. He surrendered. His bull had caught the scent of freedom. "I promise," he said, blushing again, "that I will let you see me without my clothes on before you go, if that's what you want."

David smiled through his mist. "Hereford Cathedral," he blinked. The tension eased. As they finished the meal, the Sugar Plum Fairy filled the space between tape and table with subdued, melodious beauty. David unstuck himself from his chair, tied the delicate lace serviette to his foreskin, and performed a sinuous, knowing Dance of the Single Veil until the tape clicked off.

"Ask what you want up to half my kingdom," Henry grinned.

"To go for a pee," giggled David, but he looked worried. "And I can't wait."

"Hell," Henry swore. "The only time you leave this room is when you're on your way home. We can't take risks." He panned round in desperation. "Ah!" with a deferential bow, he offered David the empty waste-paper bin. David carried it to the furthest corner and poured out a stream of sparkling, gaslit water, then took a handkerchief from a pocket of his abandoned jacket and wiped himself dry. "Your promise," he demanded peremptorily and sat down in his chair opposite the settee.

When Henry had stripped and was sitting staring across at him, David jumped up, switched the tape recorder back on and the ceiling light off, and knelt before him. "You look nice in this gaslight," the boy said. "Don't tell me to go away. I don't want money. I thought you liked me. I mean, liked me differently from the others but including that as well. That's how I like you. I've warmed the sheets with the electric blanket. You could call the bed your kingdom." He shuffled forward on his knees into the Paddington position.

"You silly little gosling, of course I don't like you – a pro from Piccadilly, a Temple-haunting tartlet. How could I ever like such a fake as that?" The boy's head, resting on the edge of the low settee, was pressed into Henry's crutch. Tears tickled sensitive areas. "No, I could never like a fake, even if I bought one and got rid of it when I'd finished with it – but I do love a red-headed boy called David, with blue eyes and everything oval, who is not a fake. I suspect we both knew it from that very first afternoon on Primrose Hill, when you thought I was kind. I've loved you all my life but tried not to give into it, because I'm afraid of the rest of the world." He patted David's bottom affectionately.

David shivered. "I'm sure it's big enough," he gulped ecstatically between sobs. "That's why the men choose me. Can't be because I'm beautiful!" More sobs. "I'll be all right. One of them had a rocket much longer and thicker than yours and he said I was the best launching pad a man could ever want. It didn't hurt me at all, either. You can have me as many times and as many ways as you like but I'll have to get out of here by six – how can you have loved me all your life? We've only just met."

"Forget it. Now I shall have to desecrate your waste-products bin," smiled Henry. Truth and opportunity very rarely came together like this. He intended to make full use of his good fortune. "Turn everything off and hop into bed."

"I can't wait," croaked David. His condition certainly suggested that he was not exaggerating. "Let me have a go here first quickly, and then we can get into bed. Please."

Henry now understood the beseeching look that had been in the wistful blue eyes. They were not wistful any more. They were urgent and voracious. David, unable to wait for wordy pedagogic acquiescence, dragged him with little difficulty down onto the rug, pushed him onto his back with a gabble of unnecessary instructions, clambered on top of him and, smoothing him with a cascade of hair and kisses, began writhing. "They shouldn't call it child abuse when people love each other," he gasped as his rapture began, soaking Henry's mouth and chin in thin, warm saliva. "It's the most beautiful thing ever invented." He got no further. "Oh, oh, o...h," he sobbed – and Henry, letting the bull run wild at last, rejoiced mutually with David in the first experience either of them could remember of being loved for himself. Locking the boy's heaving body in a world-excluding embrace, he marveled that so frail a vessel could have contained so explosive a wine – and so much.

*Darling Hal,*

*The other night was the only one, the Iroquois' last one-night stand. A boy, who I had a fight with the other day and beat him and made him bleed, snitched about me going out to men. The B.I. were waiting to nab me. I'm being sent to something called 'a secure place' in the north, but I can't tell you the adress, but I will when I know it and can sneak out a letter, and you will come looking for me, if you're not a coward, because it will be dangerous. I cant bear thinking of us never seeing each other ever again. Sorry about spellings and things and all these blotches. I'm trying to be joky like you, but I can't help crying all the time. The blotches are my tears. Knowing you, espesherly the other night, was the*

*best part of my whoal life. A friend is dropping this through your front door for me. Hope it escapes the B.I. I'm being taken away in ten minutes. At midnight tonight I shall play with myself and think of you, and I know you will do it too and think of me if I ask, so please do, becaus I LOVE YOU. Your fire is better than being in Hereford. That's another hint. Don't worry about what I said about your thing when you played coffee. You were great, and it didn't hurt once. I don't mind if you sleep with another boy, so long as I know YOU LOVE ME. Sorry I can't give you a piece of my rock to suck for a while.*

*LOVE,  
O VALGOSLING*

Henry sat down at the desk and began typing. He would re-accept the Henshaw's Christmas invitation without delay, before despair could take charge of him. Then, after Christmas...