

# The Unexpected Legacy of Uncle Edward

by Keith Spence

Every boy should have a bachelor uncle. He should be provided automatically by a caring state, like free dental treatment and basic schooling. It should be his pleasure and duty to give you unsuitable presents, to take you on wild, imaginative outings which get you back late for bedtime, and to answer all those questions which make your parents look shocked and change the subject. One of my friends at school had an uncle who took him all round the world on a cruise – and another, after binding me with a blood-curdling oath of secrecy, told me that he often spent weekends with his uncle, and slept in his bed: and he described all the illicit and delightful things they did together, crucifying my pre-pubertal emotions between shock (which I knew I was meant to feel) and jealousy (which predominated). Whether any of my other friends who came to each new term with tales of uncles' generosity did the same sort of things, I never dared ask. I think some of them must have done. Certainly those lucky enough to have uncles accorded them a love and a trust quite different from that which they gave their parents. After all, parents fed you and clothed you, but uncles took you to Cup Finals and let you steer their cars and got you into X films when you were still four years too young. There was no question who was the more important. Uncles were adored by their nephews, and any boy without one deserved to be regarded with pity.

I had an uncle. I hated him like hell.

Uncle Edward was my mother's only brother, and about ten years older than her. He was long and thin with a red, raw face, a nose like a parrot's beak, and a mouth clenched as tightly as his heart. Whenever he came to visit us he had a cold – it seemed to be a permanent feature of his personality – and he used to swallow bottlefuls of pills and potions, in between blowing his nose repulsively on a series of evil handkerchiefs which my mother then had to boil clean. I remember him as always dressed in the same clothes – black jacket, gray waistcoat, and gray

flannel trousers that flapped forlornly around his spindly legs. He 'touched up' his prematurely gray hair with some disgusting dye which left it in irregular black streaks, and his eyes watered, and his hands were cold and dead. All in all, he was about as affectionate as a mortuary slab. He was, however, a brilliant scholar and an internationally recognised authority on a variety of abstruse academic subjects, and my mother worshiped him with total devotion. What my father thought he never said, although as I grew older I discerned an aloofness behind his impeccable good manners which told its own story.

But my father's work often took him away from home, and my uncle's whim often brought him to visit us, so I grew up in the shadow of his clammy personality. When he was at our house he ignored me, and so did my mother. When he was away, my mother talked about him constantly. Any small victory I won, any discovery I made and took to her, merely prompted yet another story of what Uncle Edward had achieved by the time he was my age. If I passed an exam, Uncle Edward had passed it higher. If I got a good report, Uncle Edward had got a better. And even if occasionally I was able to surpass him – like when I was picked for the school swimming team – it was only to be informed that of course Uncle Edward hadn't thought such things important. By the time I was 20, I had been told so often that I was inferior to him in every way that I had started believing it in spite of myself.

Maybe that feeling of inferiority was the reason I fought so hard to be a success: if I couldn't prove to my family that I was someone to be reckoned with, at least I could prove it to everybody else. The success came hard, but it came. By 26 I was assistant manager in a firm that manufactured computer software. At 28 I started my own business in the same field. And nine years later, I was employing six hundred staff, and taking orders from 27 countries. Despite my mother's contention that I was simply exploiting the creative ideas of other people – such as my Uncle Edward – I felt fairly good about what I had achieved. Nevertheless, I won't deny that there was a price to pay. Long, irregular hours; difficult decisions; heavy responsibility. I was young and strong, and there was no question of my nerves not being up to the strain. But social life and leisure-time became non-existent. At 37 I had no friends outside my work, and I hadn't taken a holiday for twelve years.

It was at that point that Uncle Edward finally, brutally and irrevocably altered the course of my entire life. He died.

It happened in early September, and on the day of the funeral – a gray, drizzle day – I picked up my mother in London, and drove her to

Papworth Everard, the village in Cambridgeshire where he had lived so as to be close to the university. We were the only family present in the church; indeed, the only family he had, my father having long since died. A few academic friends, and some neighbors, dutifully attended the service and stood around with us for a few moments afterwards before drifting away about their more urgent concerns. We went to the crematorium alone. But as we emerged from that macabre charade into the gray drizzle, an elegant young man presented himself to us as Uncle Edward's lawyer. The will was quite simple. Some books and manuscripts to his Cambridge college library. The rest of his estate came to me.

"I don't want it!" I protested to my mother.

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "Your Uncle Edward had some beautiful things. Beautiful. Lovely furniture. Pictures. Not that you'd appreciate them."

"What the hell can I do with them? Even if I auction them...."

"You'll do no such thing! How dare you think of selling them! They were precious to your Uncle Edward. Things he cherished. Auction indeed! I never heard of such ingratitude. You'll drive me to London, then you'll come back here, stay at his house, and take a look at your inheritance. And be grateful, if you know how!"

I sighed inwardly – I knew that tone. But she was right. There was a lot to be done filling in forms, notifying the various bureaucracies, putting the house on the market and so forth, and nobody else was going to do it. It would take me a good week. Time enough to consider how to get rid of his late-Victorian junk. For once the business would have to cope without me.

So I ferried her to London, stopped to pick up a few basic supplies, and then drove morosely back to Cambridgeshire. Dusk was falling as I parked outside Uncle Edward's dingy little semi and let myself in with the yale the lawyer had given me.

My inheritance. It was what I had expected. Heavy, dark furniture, bees-waxed and over-ornate. Stolid still-life studies in oak frames. Books everywhere. And papers everywhere, too – I pulled out a few drawers at random, and they were all bulging with manuscripts and correspondence: it looked as if my uncle had kept every letter he had ever received. Bloody old man. It would all have to be gone through. I left the bottle of scotch I had brought ready on the desk and went upstairs. Two bedrooms – my uncle's, cold and dark and still smelling of old age, and a comparatively civilized spare room with a double bed. I

threw my overnight bag in there and, depression deepening at every step, trudged down to the antiquated kitchen to knock up an early supper. The tinned, instant *chile-con-carne* (“the authentic tang of the Great Outdoors”) did absolutely nothing to raise my spirits. I washed up morosely and then, having nothing better to do, took myself back to the study and the scotch, switched on the desk light, and began the Herculean task of reducing my uncle's chaotic affairs to some sort of order.

I worked through the top two desk drawers, heaping the papers into piles of bills, receipts, correspondence and personal affairs. The light outside dwindled, the level in the scotch bottle got lower, and the dank house seemed to close broodingly around me. I promised myself that tomorrow night I'd go out into the village – perhaps even into Cambridge. Have a decent meal, maybe go to the theater or a concert if there was one on. Something I hadn't done for years. With a sigh I started on the third drawer.

“What are you doing here? Are you a thief?”

My head jerked up as if I'd been kicked, and my mouth fell open. I must have look ridiculous. At any rate, he obviously thought so.

“Sorry,” he laughed. “Did I make you jump? I didn't mean to. I saw the light on through the window. I knew the professor was – you know – dead. I thought it might be a ghost. Or burglars. You aren't angry are you?”

I discovered that my mouth was still open, and closed it. “No, I'm not angry. But I'm afraid I'm not a burglar or a ghost. How did you get in?”

“The door was on the latch. You have to give it an extra pull to shut it properly, otherwise it sticks.”

“You seem to know a lot about it?”

He moved easily into the room. How old? 12? 13? I hadn't noticed children for so long that I had no idea about guessing ages.

“I've been coming here twice a week for...” – he grimaced – “extra tuition. I'm always bottom at school. My ma arranged for me to come.”

He spoke with the Cambridgeshire burr – a soft country accent, totally different from the metallic whine of the city. His voice was alto. Soon, I supposed, it would be starting to break. I waved at a chair.

He smiled and shook his head. “I'd best be getting back. Ma'll be worried.”

“Stay for a few minutes,” I said, surprising myself. The emptiness of the house had obviously effected me more than I'd realized. “I'll make a cup of tea. I'm afraid there's nothing else, except this – ” I tapped the

bottle of scotch.

“No, I'd best be going,” he repeated. “She's an awful worrier, our ma. I only came in 'coz I saw the light. I'll pull the door for you so's it shuts properly.” At the threshold of the room he turned. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“Yes. And most of the week.”

“P'rhaps I'll come and see you again, then.”

And with that he was gone. For no reason at all, the house seemed even bleaker and more dismal. It was with an unexpected pang of loss that I realized I didn't know his name.

He didn't turn up the next morning. I finished sorting through Uncle Edward's desk, burnt seven-eighths of what I'd found in the heavy iron fireplace, and at 1.00 walked down to the local pub for lunch. Calling myself a fool, I took two cans of coke back with me. And left the door on the latch. Then I started in on the chest-of-drawers under the window, which if anything contained even older and more confusing documents than the desk had done. There were also dozens of loose photos, showing blurred groups of middle-aged or elderly academics peering self-consciously at the lens. None of them were labeled.

He came at 3.00. This time, being near the window, I heard the snick of the gate catch, and looked up in time to see him wheel his bike in and lock it against the railings. He saw my face and waved, grinning – then pushed his way inside as if he knew that the door would be unlocked, and bounced into the study.

“Hi,” he said. “I told Ma about you. She says you must be one of the professor's family. Are you?”

“He was my uncle.”

“Was I cheeky last night? I told Ma I wasn't, but she says she bets I was. I'm sorry if you're unhappy about him being dead. Ma said I could come and help you if I didn't get in the way.”

“You weren't cheeky at all, and I'm very glad to see you.” I grasped my opportunity. “What's your name, anyway?”

“Danny. What's yours?”

“William.”

“Shouldn't I call you Mr. Something?”

“What on earth for?”

He looked at me assessingly, then nodded. “OK. But William's boring. Willie?” – He burst into a fit of giggles – “Oh, no, I can't call

you that, can I? I'll call you Bill. Is there anything you want me to help you with?"

The speed with which he switched subjects was beginning to confuse me, so I put him to work clearing out some of the cupboards in the hall and stacking what he found on the kitchen table. We shouted conversation between us as we worked, and by the time we stopped for tea, I'd found out that he lived on a farm a couple of miles outside the village, had a sister he hated and a baby brother he adored, and that he had few expectations or ambitions beyond leaving school and eventually taking over the farm, although he did sometimes think he might be a racing driver instead. In return, I'd told him about London, which he'd never seen, and about my business – especially about how computers could be applied to farming, which intrigued him a lot. Bottom of his class he may have been, but he had a deft grasp of basic principals and a flair for spotting possibilities which were more valuable than any book-learning. When we took our break I told him so. He blushed slightly, and took a swallow of Coke to hide his embarrassment.

"Oh, I'm thick. All my teachers say so. That's why Ma sent me to the professor. He was really clever. Are you as clever as him?"

I felt the old stab of resentment. "Not in the same ways," I said. "Like I told you, there are different ways of being clever. Uncle Edward was good at having ideas. I'm good at making things work." Then, as he nodded thoughtfully, I asked, "Did you like him?"

"He was alright." He looked at me with innocence as transparent as gossamer. "He used to take me out to the pictures, sometimes."

"That sounds remarkably like a hint."

"They've got *Invaders Out Of Time* on in Cambridge.

I told myself that this was one thing at which Uncle Edward was not going to outdo me. "OK," I said, "I tell you what. You come and help me again tomorrow morning and we'll go tomorrow afternoon."

His face fell. "I can't come in the morning – I've got things to do on the farm. Can't I come and work in the afternoon, and then we can go in the evening?"

"Sure – but won't your Mum and Dad mind your getting home so late?"

"That's OK," he said. "You can write them a note saying I'm going to sleep here. That's what the professor used to do whenever he took me. You don't mind, do you?"

"Don't – don't be ridiculous!" I managed after the third attempt. "They've never even met me. How do they know I wouldn't – er –"

“Wouldn't what?”

“Well....”

“They won't mind, honest. I've slept away lots of times, with mates and things. And here with the professor. Or don't you want me to?”

“Well, yes – it's just....”

“Write the letter, then.”

I wrote the letter.

And after he had taken himself and it off home, I sat in the gathering dusk, in communion with the remains of the whiskey, astonishingly confronting a gibbering riot of ideas and emotions which had suddenly, impossibly, sprouted all over my nice uncluttered brain.

It wasn't so much his confident suggestion that he should spend the night – for all I knew, kids did that sort of thing every day. It was more the bacchanalia of memories that his casual proposal had needled out of my subconscious. I hadn't thought about boys in a sexual way for nearly 20 years – in fact, I suppose I hadn't thought about them at all. Somehow it had been expected that after leaving school, one's sexual energies should be directed towards women, and I had – conformed, I suppose: although it must be admitted, without very much enthusiasm, and certainly without any permanent liaisons. Now Danny's innocent remarks had reached across the years and abruptly brought back to me the words of my school-friend, describing his weekends with his uncle. And brought back too, in a flood, the remembrance of the exquisitely intense pleasure I had found at school in the beds and the arms of younger boys. God knows why I had buried the memories for so long. Now they tumbled home to me, with echoes of breathless laughter and images of soft, warm bodies thrusting against each other. And suddenly I realized with a shock that the image which stood out above all the others was that of Danny himself.

And hard on the heels of that uncomfortable revelation came the inevitable, undodgeable question.

Had Danny... and Uncle Edward... ?

No, of course they hadn't. The idea was preposterous. I was reading far too much into the boy's innocent remarks. And even if he was that sort of kid, he couldn't possibly have been attracted to Uncle Edward, with his colds and his clammy hands...

Could he?

And Uncle Edward certainly hadn't been that type of man! He'd always said that his work came before everything.

Yet Danny had often spent the night here. And Uncle Edward had

never married.

But then, he'd never tried anything with me when I was a boy.

Perhaps he hadn't liked me. Or had thought it was too risky.

As, of course, it was. Far too risky. I wasn't sure what happened to men who got caught having relationships with boys, but I had an idea that they put them in prison and threw away the key.

And on that salutary reflection I took myself off to bed.

The cause of all my confusion breezed in at noon the next day with a self-satisfied grin, a carrier-bag of over- night things, and a gift of a dozen eggs from his mother. Awareness heightened by the unresolved questions ricocheting around inside my skull, I found myself watching him while he worked. There was no denying his attractiveness. Though he was still small, his body was sturdy and compact, and he moved with the easy confidence of one who is used to hard work. Laboring on the farm had given him a late-summer tan, which stretched away inside his open-necked shirt and showed up the bleached, preadolescent down along his forearms. His hair was sun-bleached, too, streaking into shades that ranged from straw-ocher to nearly white. He wore it long and ragged, and had a habit of pushing it brusquely away from his eyes which delighted me with its blend of childish petulance and adult practicality. His face wasn't beautiful – it wasn't delicate enough for that – but the soft line of his jaw and the broad, firm mouth gave hints of strength to come. He was freckled across the nose and under the eyes, and his skin glowed with health. In fact his whole body radiated a clean, outdoor energy which cut through the gloom of my uncle's house like a shaft of pure summer. Occasionally, as we worked and chatted, he would glance up and catch me looking at him: and then his eyes sparkled into a grin of something remarkably akin to complicity – almost as if he knew what I was thinking....

And what I was thinking, I finally had to admit, was that Danny was certainly the sexiest young animal I had encountered for – well, far too long: and that more than anything else just then, I wanted to put my arms round him and hug him hard.

Just contemplating which, I reminded myself, was probably enough to have me put away for life, besides being self-deluding, impractical, corrupt, reckless to a lunatic degree, and liable to frighten the horses.

The day seemed to rush past. We made good progress with Uncle Edward's affairs: indeed, by the time we stopped, the worst was done. But instead of delighting me as it would have done 48 hours earlier, I



found myself cast into gloom at the thought of leaving, and perhaps not seeing Danny again. We had got to know each other still better that afternoon, and he had opened out even further about himself and his life, nudging past the normal bounds of conversation as though trying to shock me, or see how far he could trust me, or I wasn't sure what. He told me in detail about taking one of his father's mares to be covered at the local stud; and a few minutes later informed me that he had started masturbating some weeks ago, and did I think it was "wrong or anything?" For my part, I found myself making excuses to touch him – lifting him into the attic-space, steadying him on ladders, even, once, sitting him on my shoulders to investigate some boxes on top of a cupboard. His skin was warm and silky, and I could feel the soft flow of muscle under the thin material of his shirt. Lowering him to the floor again when the jobs were finished, and stepping away from him, needed all the willpower I could muster.

Question as I would, however, I could not discover what kind of a relationship Danny had had with my uncle. The possibility that here, as in everything else, Uncle Edward had achieved what I had not, scarified me with jealousy. The alternative – that Danny was as naive as he pretended – was safer but infinitely frustrating. Merely looking at the boy made me so hard that I was certain he would eventually notice it.

At 6.00 we gave up the work, washed, and transferred to my Jaguar Convertible. It was still warm enough to have the hood down, and Danny was thrilled by the thrusting sleekness of the car as I pushed the needle up towards 100 on the A.45 into Cambridge. The film began at 7.40, so I took him to a steak bar, and then we queued for *Invaders Out Of Time* – just like father and son, I couldn't help thinking, and wondered if the same thought (grandfather and grandson?) had ever crossed Uncle Edward's mind. The film itself was tremendous. I hadn't been to the cinema in years, so hadn't realized what progress had been made in special effects and trick photography. The monsters were revolting, the heroes handsome and daring, the battles noisy, and the 25<sup>th</sup> century hardware utterly convincing. I don't know who was the more spellbound, Danny or me, and we drove back through the velvet evening pretending to be astro-cruisers, power-zapping imaginary alien sniper craft and then warping out of trouble into a different time-zone.

Until suddenly we were home; it was 11.00; the door had been given its extra pull to make sure that the lock clicked; and I couldn't put off the decision any longer.

There was the spare room; and there was Uncle Edward's room. I

was sleeping in the spare room, so if Danny usually slept in there he'd have to change to Uncle Edward's room: whereas if he usually slept with Uncle Edward, he might automatically go to the bedroom he was used to, or he might expect to be asked to mine. Or he might assume I was sleeping in Uncle Edward's room, and go into the spare room because he'd think it would be free, or...

I gave up trying to work out the permutations, and led the way upstairs. Danny followed silently, even shyly. At the top he faced me.

"Where are you sleeping?"

My nerve failed me. "In there. The spare room. I'll make you up a bed in the other bedroom."

"Is that where you want me to sleep?"

My heart jolted with something between disbelief and joy, and I fell back on aggression to cover my desperate hope. "You can sleep in the bath for all I care. Or on top of the wardrobe."

He laughed, then looked away.

"When I came to stay with the professor," he mumbled, addressing his left shoe, "I slept with him."

Silence ghosted between us like smoke.

My *bloody* uncle. Alright, then. If he hadn't been afraid of the risks, I was damned if I was going to be.

"Would you like to sleep with me, too?" I asked. Adding, incongruously, "Please?"

His face lit up as he grinned at me. Yes, it had been a grin of complicity.

"Wow – for a moment I thought I'd got you wrong!" he said. "Come on!"

Any shyness I might have imagined in him earlier certainly hadn't lasted long. Inside the bedroom he thrust himself into my arms and hugged me, moving his hips so that his pelvis rubbed against the top of my legs. And now I could feel, through the coarse material of his jeans, the hard shape of his erection. I pushed my hand down between us to rub it, and he laughed up into my face.

"It's been like that all afternoon." he said. "All the time we were talking about wanking and things. And when I was sitting on your shoulders. I was sure you'd notice! I just couldn't make it go down!"

"I was as well," I told him. And then I slid my hand up to loosen his belt, and pulled his jeans down around his knees, so that I could stroke between his legs, across his thighs and over the strong cheeks of his

buttocks.

Abruptly he pushed me away, and hurriedly kicked off his shoes and socks, wriggled out of his jeans and pants and pulled his shirt over his head. Then he leapt onto the bed and lay there in tense anticipation. Stripped, the young strength of his body was apparent in his shoulders, chest, and the firm muscles of his legs. He must have worked practically naked throughout the summer, because only the briefest triangle of white around his crotch interrupted the honey tan of his skin.

He leaned across and pulled at the waist-band of my trousers.

“Come *on!*” he demanded urgently.

I fumbled out of my clothes, leaving them muddled with Danny's on the floor, and joined him on the bed. To be honest, I was still a little unsure as to how to go about things, but Danny knew what he wanted. As I stretched out beside him he pulled me over on top of him, hugging me around the waist, tilting his hips up and straining his legs wide apart. I could feel him rubbing frantically against my stomach – and around that ecstatic epicenter, less acute but still deliciously perceptible, I was aware of the smoothness and warmth of his body, of the smell of his hair in my face, like grass in summer, and the excited panting of his breath in my ear. I slid my hands under his back and down to his buttocks, straining him harder to me, and his grip squeezed tighter in return – then I felt him pushing me sideways; so I rolled over, bringing him on top of me, and rubbed at his back as he pushed and writhed wildly against me, pressing the length of his body down on mine, his skin sliding over me like living velvet. His urgency mounted quickly, the movement of his hips and pelvis transposing into a deep rhythmical thrust which grew fuller and more frenzied every minute until at last, with a shuddering gasp of pleasure, he went rigid in my arms, strained in quivering ecstasy for long moments, and then sighed and sank voluptuously and damply onto my stomach.

I lay and stroked him softly, kissing his cheek, until at last he raised his head and looked down at me, his eyes sleepy and contented. I kissed his lips, and he allowed it, giggling; then he eased backwards and took me in his hands.

“Now you.”

I was already so intensely aroused that I had been on the verge of culmination several times, and he didn't have much to do. Pressing me between his hands and the soft skin of his belly, he rubbed himself along it until everything went beyond control, and I pulled him back on top of me. Then finally we lay quiet, making little movements of pleasure

against each other, in a drifting nimbus of security and peace.

“Is this what you did with Uncle Edward?” I murmured.

“Mmmm. Sometimes.”

The security and peace wavered as a jagged shaft of jealousy clawed at them.

“It's better with you, though.”

The jealousy went away.

Soon after that I heard his breathing slow and deepen, and when I whispered his name he didn't answer; so I eased him off me, pulled the sheet over us, and turned on my side and cuddled him against me again. Then I, too, slept.

It was 8.00 when I woke, and Danny was still sleeping. He had turned over during the night, and was lying with his back against me, his buttocks pressed against my groin. By raising myself on an elbow I was able to look down into his face. He appeared impossibly young, all the passion of the night before smoothed away in the innocence of sleep. I let my hand stroke down his body, exploring gently, so as not to wake him, his firm chest, his flanks, and the silky skin of his stomach rising and falling with his sleeping breath. He was flaccid; but as my fingers fondled him he started to tumesce and soon, although he hadn't awakened, he was stiff under my touch. I rubbed him gently until, with a sigh, he rolled over and nuzzled warmly against me. I lay and stroked him while he gradually woke, and mumbled something in my ear.

“What was that?” I asked, startled, sure that I had misheard him.

He put his arms round my neck and hugged closer to me.

“Your uncle,” he whispered, “used to...”

I hadn't misheard. Uncle Edward, I forced myself to admit, had been quite an operator.

That sort of thing had never figured in my school-days experiments: we had been too naive, I suppose. But if Uncle Edward had done it, I was damned if I would refuse: and anyway, it would give Danny pleasure, which just then was something I wanted to do very much indeed.

So I kicked the bedclothes off us and went down on him, taking him gently in my mouth. Like most boys of his age, he had hair-trigger sexuality, and within seconds I found, as I had the night before, that in fact I needed to do very little. Danny's own movements served his own needs, sometimes pushing deeply and luxuriously right to the hilt, sometimes rubbing just the tip rapidly across my tongue and teeth. He

was making noises, too: tiny grunts and whimpers of delight – and as my hands stroked over and across his body, I found his legs and shoulders trembling.

And for myself.... Well, I suppose I had realized that kissing, say, could be an erotic experience in a purely oral sense – but nothing had prepared me for the incredible intensity of excitement I now felt. I found my whole awareness telescoped down to that one area of sensation. I don't know whether it is scientifically possible to have an oral climax: I do know that there is no other way to describe what I was feeling.

Then Danny was on the move again. Hardly daring to believe it, I felt him swivel round on me so that he was still in my mouth but his knees were either side of my head. Seconds later, there was a nudging between my legs, and then a delicious sensation of warmth and tightness as his lips closed around me, and that was without any question the single most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me in my life. Soon my body was moving as urgently as his, and my excitement must have communicated itself, for now we were racing each other toward the finish.

He won. I suddenly felt him kick and swell in my mouth, and throb six or seven times, while his body tensed rigidly against me. The taste was sweet and slightly salty – there were only a few drops as yet. Slowly he relaxed, rubbing himself with infinitesimal movements back and forth between my lips, clinging to the last ecstatic moments. At the same time I realized my end was approaching. I tried to pull out of him, but he held me there insistently, caressing me with his tongue, until he took all that was in me, and swallowed convulsively. Then, gasping, we let go of each other and rolled apart.

He scrambled around and came up with his head on the pillow beside me. I put an arm round him and stroked his hair.

“That was – incredible,” I told him.

“Mmm. Smashing.”

“I've never done that before.”

“Haven't you? Oh, I have. Heaps of times. With the professor and people.”

“Christ! Is there anything else you used to do with my uncle?”

He looked at me enigmatically. “Well – not on the same day....” he said.

For breakfast we cooked some of the eggs he had brought – much better than the supermarket variety I had been getting all my life. Then,

the washing-up done, I looked at him regretfully.

“I suppose I've got to take you home, Danny.”

He nodded. “I'd better be getting back. But I'll come again tomorrow. I'll come every day, if I can; though it can't be for so long when I'm back at school.”

“I'll be in London by then, anyway.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I'll have to be back at my job soon. I'm only here for as long as it takes to put this house up for sale....”

“He interrupted me, his face stricken. “But – but I thought – you were going to come and live here!”

“Danny, I can't. I've got a business to run.”

“Won't I ever see you again, then?”

“Don't be daft. I'll come up whenever I can. Weekends. Perhaps your Mum and Dad might let you come down to London some time.”

He looked mollified. “Wow – I thought you meant you were just going to go away and never come back.”

“After last night? Christ, no!”

He grinned. “Well, you didn't ought to sell this place then, did you? Then, when you come up to see me, we'll have somewhere to do it.”

“I haven't got the money to keep it on.”

“Why can't you sell your house in London?”

“I've got to be near my work. And now,” I said in what I hoped was a decisive voice, “I'm taking you home. You're getting far too inclined to organize my affairs.”

He'd come in by bus the day before, having more than usual to carry, so I had said I'd take him home in the car. Privately, I quite wanted to meet his parents and make my mark with them. If, as I hoped, I was going to see more of Danny, I needed their approval and blessing.

Half-way to his farm, as we were just leaving the village, he again produced the words I was coming to welcome and to dread:

“When I was out with the professor...”

I sighed. “Yes?”

“Well, there's an old airfield close to here where nobody ever goes. He sometimes let me drive his car.”

“Did he indeed!” I said in some surprise. “How good are you?”

“Dad's taught me a bit, too. On the farm.”

“OK,” I agreed. “But only if you promise to do exactly as I say.”

The way his face lit up made even the risk to my beloved Jaguar

worthwhile. And when, five minutes later, he climbed into the driving seat, he was literally quivering with excitement. Not many boys get a chance to handle an XK.150. That, at least, I told myself smugly, was something Uncle Edward had not been able to give him.

Indeed, as far as teaching him to drive went, neither Uncle Edward nor his father seemed to have got very far. We stayed mostly in second gear, and got away to some very jerky starts. Nevertheless, when I called a halt half an hour later, he'd grasped the rudiments of the art. We changed places again, and he lay back in his seat, tired from the concentration, his eyes closed. I looked with pleasure at the smoothness of his cheek and the damp hair falling across his forehead, and wished it was 11 o'clock the night before.

"Danny," I said gently, "I'm afraid you've just gone and given the game away."

He jerked his head around, startled. "What do you mean?"

"You've never driven before."

"Yes, I have."

"Maybe a bit with your dad. But with Uncle Edward?"

"Well – not every time, actually. Only three or four times..."

"Danny, Uncle Edward hated cars. He never went in one if he could possibly help it. He never learned to drive. And he certainly never owned a car in his life."

I saw guilt flood into his eyes, color mount into his face. He looked away.

"It's alright. Really I'm not angry. But I'd have let you drive my car anyway. I don't understand why you wanted to lie about Uncle Edward."

He made a small noise. I put out my hand and turned his face to me, concerned that he was crying. I should have known better. He was trying to stifle a fit of giggles.

I laughed too. "Alright," I said. "So tell me the joke."

He took a deep breath. "Well, you see – you know when I asked you to take me to the cinema – when I said the professor always used to?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't really mean it. I mean, I didn't actually think you truly would take me. But you did. And I thought it was probably because of me saying that the professor had done it."

"And he didn't."

"Danny rocked with another explosion of giggles. "The professor? In a cinema? He'd have flipped! Anyway... when you did take me, I figured I could make you do things just by saying the professor had done

them.”

The boy's grasp of elementary psychology was uncanny.

Then the implications of what he was saying hit me. “You mean my uncle never...?”

He laughed up into my face. “Well, it worked, didn't it?”

“But – I mean – did you ever know my uncle?”

“Oh, I used to go to him for lessons – like I told you the first time I saw you. But I thought he was really mean. And he never asked me to stay or anything. And I wouldn't have wanted to even if he had.”

“But – last night – Danny, you've done all that before. It wasn't the first time. You were – too good at it.”

“It was, honest...with a grown-up, anyway. I've wanted to for ages. I've got this mate at school called Billy – you'll like him – anyway, me and Billy muck around together – you know. But last term Billy met this man at the amusements in Cambridge, and the man took him into Midsummer Common and did it to him – sucked him and everything – and Billy said it was really great. He's gone back lots of times, but he's never seen the bloke again. Ever since I've really wanted to do it with a man.”

“You and Billy...?”

“Oh, yes. And we pretend I'm the man and I pick him up. But it's not as good – and anyway, I don't want to do everything with him and he doesn't want to do it with me. I never thought I'd want to do all of it with you, actually. But when I found out how good it felt I wanted you to feel it as well. And it's fun, really, once you've started, isn't it?”

I nodded, feeling the inadequacy of such a simple agreement. One thing troubled me, however: “How in hell did you know that I was... well.. interested?”

“I didn't. Not at first. But you kept looking at me – you know – and asking me to come round, so I sort of hoped you were. And you were, so that was alright.”

“But – if you never used to stay with Uncle Edward, how the hell did you get your mother to let you spend last night?” I thought of my note to her and shuddered at the risk I had run.

He shrugged. “It took a bit of talking. But she knew the professor – and I s'pose she thought anyone that moldy'd have to have boring, safe old relatives. Still,” he added thoughtfully, “p'rhaps you'd better come in and see her when we get back.”

“Yes, p'rhaps I had,” I said grimly as I put the car into gear and moved off.



“Then when she's met you she won't mind if I come over to your house every day.”

“Danny, it's not my house! Get it into your head that it's got to be sold! I can't afford two houses! I promise I'll come and see you – often – but living in Cambridge is out!”

It's nearly a year, now, since I sold my London house and moved to Papworth Everard. It's not as difficult as I had feared, running the business from outside London: and to tell the truth, I'm not doing as much as I used to – I've promoted a couple of my executives to full partners, and they've taken on a lot of the donkey-work. I sometimes go a whole week without visiting London at all.

Ten o'clock: and we have just shown the last of the kids out of the door, latched it securely on them but not on their cheerfulness, which always lingers long after they have left. The redecorating of Uncle Edward's old, dark Victorian rooms was done almost entirely with volunteer boy-labor and, having worked so hard on it, they quite rightly consider my house partly their own, to come and go in as they please. Danny himself lords it over them, and views me mainly as his property, although he graciously lends me out from time to time.

I switch off the lights, and we walk towards the stairs together. Except during the busy times on the farm, he usually stays with me: it's more convenient for his school – of which, to his intense disgust, I have recently become a governor.

On the landing at the head of the stairs, in the place of honor, hangs a portrait of my uncle Edward. My mother came to stay last week, and was suitably impressed.

“I am glad to see, William, that you are paying your Uncle proper respect!” she said – and I'll swear she did a little bob in front of it, as if genuflecting at a shrine.

“But of course, Mother,” I told her, straight-faced. “He was so generous, leaving me all his property. I honestly do appreciate it. I don't think he realized how valuable some of his legacy was.”

“Edward always had a very good sense of values,” she said smugly.

The house is dark, except for the light shining from the bedroom. Danny sighs luxuriously.

“Mmm. Saturday. No school.”

“What do you want to do?”

“What do you think?”

“Billy's coming round at nine o'clock...”

“So what? He can let himself in. And – er – join us.”

“I thought we might all drive over to Alton Towers?” I

suggest. “You know – that amusement park that was on TV.”

“What, where they've got those bob-sleighs? Could we? That'd be brill!” He looks up mischievously. “Afterwards.”

I ruffle his hair. “Don't you ever think of anything else ?”

“Course I do. Lots of things. But – er...”

“But what?”

The front of his jeans is noticeably fuller than it was a few minutes ago. He drops one hand to rub it as he pulls me towards the bedroom.

“Well – Christ – it's nearly midnight. I mean, what else am I supposed to think about? Come on. Hurry!”