Wu Ming 4

Morning Star

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I hold truly fortunate those to whom the gods grant the ability to make things worthy of being written about or write things worthy of being read. Very fortunate are those who are granted both.

Pliny the Younger, *Letter 65*, *to Tacitus*[i]

We have gone through with a glorious endeavor

And been much favored in this fight we dared

Against the unknown.

Beowulf 14, 958-60[ii]

[i] *Letters of Pliny the Younger,* ed. F. C. T. Bosanquet & trans. William Melmoth, (Project Gutenberg EBook) n.p.

[ii] *Beowulf: A Verse Translation,* trans. Seanus Heaney (New York: Norton, 2002).

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Prologue

The line of the horizon, sharp like the edge of a sword, divides the earth from the viscous blue above. Nothing, as far as the eye can see. Nothing, no plants, no animals. An unobstructed view of uniform nothingness. Moving or standing still makes no difference. Yet, low shadows precede the camels, which move over the milky surface, ever so relentlessly. The human beings sit, balanced, swaying, their faces muffled so that the sun's reflection does not burn their eyes. They proceed in a file, mute and blind, following the thousand-year old path by instinct, since the first pilgrim crossed this land, perceiving his finitude and the physical suffering that brought him closer to God, the Merciful and Compassionate.

Only when the sun leaves the zenith does the profile of the hills appear and the distance regains its proportion. The mountains float on a lake which slowly dissolves along the way, a play of refraction and heat to tempt the spirit of men, who can only pray for a quick sunset.

The first star is already above them when they stop near a well. After the isolation imposed on them by the daily toil, there appears a sense of a communal life on this cold and inhospitable soil. Someone strikes up a prayer, the men uncover their faces and kneel on the straw mats, for a long time, as if they were too tired to wake up and pray again, to drink, even too tired to sleep. While the last mouthfuls of flour are baking in the fire, one could still ask someone for the consolation of a tale. All eyes turn towards the most ancient one, with the grey beard and face reddened by the sun. His voice vibrates with the rhythm of a litany. He tells of the holy war of the Arabs against their Turkish masters, under the brilliant guidance of Prince Feisal, may God's beneficence be on him and his captains. Legendary combatants whose names make the enemy tremble: Sherif Ali Ibn-el-Hussein. Sherif Nasin, Prince Nuri Shaalan. Auda Abu Tayfi, the greatest warrior of Arabia. El Urens, who had brought to the Arabs the Gift by Nobel, a weapon that is invincible, so powerful that it can bend the iron and split a rock. The Turks cannot rest, in spite of their armoured trains, loaded with cannons and machine guns, they cannot gain victory against this force that crushes and decapitates them, transforming them into a pile of scrap iron, a den for jackals.

The flames of the bonfire take on the silhouettes of galloping soldiers, wrapped up in a cloud of dust and smoke. The men scrutinize the darkness that surrounds them, their ears perked so as to pick up the echo of explosions across the desert.

When they turn to look at the old man, he is already lying down on his side, leaving them prey to these visions of victory. One after another, they resign themselves to imitate him, aware that sleep will be light under the stars.

Parnassus

Autumn 1919

1. The Show

The odalisques had freckles.

They swayed to the shrill sound of the flute, standing against a painted backdrop: the Nile, the pyramids, a silver crescent moon. The intoning song of the muezzin followed the melody.

A drum beat, and the man in an evening suit darted out of a cloud of smoke. A smell of incense filled the first rows. Someone coughed. The man made as to bow and touched the lectern with the grace of an orchestra director who controls the score.

“Follow me, ladies and gentlemen, into the mysterious land of the Orient, rich with legends and adventures, where Jordan pours its sacred water into the Dead Sea and others also, between the oases and the desert dunes.”

The Genie in the Bottle had thin moustaches, black hair parted in two waves of brilliantine, an American accent. He slowed down his words, holding them in the mouth as long as necessary, anticipating the effect, before shooting them out.

The military band struck up with Handel, while a luminous ray was flying over the expanse of heads, all the way to the centre of the screen. Crowds of soldiers poured into the Royal Opera House: faces fierce, eyes cold like those of raiders, old like biblical fires.

“This is the scene of the event that we’ll tell you about: the undertaking of General Allenby, the liberator of Jerusalem, and the Uncrowned King of Arabia, he who could hold the scepter of Mecca and Damascus but has instead yielded to the legitimate heirs of the Prophet Mohammed.”

The image of a Western man in Arab garments appeared, with a showy curved dagger under his belt. From the top of the dune he was smiling at the camera. The contagion of wonder ran through the audience from one person to another.

The musical theme restarted, in a lower octave.

“Turks and Germans have placed a bounty of fifty million sterling pounds on the head of this young archeologist, dead or alive. But I, who had the honour of knowing him, can tell you that not one of the Arabs would’ve consented for half this sum, because they knew that the possibility of breaking the yoke of the Ottoman Empire depended largely on the ability of this timid youth.”

Now on screen the white Arab could be seen in a semi-circle of crouched Bedouins, sitting just a little back of the others, almost wanting to hide from the camera. Someone from outside this group was inviting them to rise and they were giggling together like schoolchildren in a group photo. The Westerner was shielding himself, shorter in height than the others, the features of his face elusive under his headdress.

“He is nothing more than a simple student of archeology, with a love for liberty typical of his Irish ancestry, who had chosen to come to the desert to excavate the ruins of ancient civilizations. But soon he heard of the call to arms, ran to enlist in the British army. Only to disappear in the desert . . . wrapped in mystery.”

A studious pause. And a sandstorm flashed on the screen, red, like a fire or a spot of blood in the dust.

“He reappeared a little time later. Without one day of training, and challenging the military hierarchies themselves, he became a personal counselor to the King of Hejaz, Sheikh Hussein, who, with his sons, would lead the Revolt against the Turkish usurpers.”

On the screen an old man with a turban and a big white beard that stood out against his dark skin surveyed the spectators. He left the place again for the white Arab, in a princely manner, his gaze fixed on the anonymous emptiness that was looking at him. The photo was grotesquely coloured: pink cheeks and vermillion lips. A man made-up and masked. Unrecognizable.

String instruments and drum beats began the crescendo of the music. The Welsh Guards ready to charge.

“What we will recount is not a story of wars and massacres, but of a man to whom divine powers were attributed. A young cavalryman who by himself created an army and liberated Holy Arabia, and who will go down in history equal to the most grandiose and picturesque characters. They will sing of his feats in the future century, like Achilles, Siegfried, or El Cid.”

The music reached a peak, while a green and gold standard was descending from high.

“Lawrence of Arabia.”

Instinct tells him to turn around. He discovered a pair of black eyes at the end of the ultimate row. Twenty, twenty-two years tops. He made an effort to go back to the stories of Mr. Thomas, a reporter from the *Chicago Evening Journal,* intent on offering the gentle public an evening of exoticism and great epic events. Back from its resounding American success, it is finally in London, the show of the year: *Lowell Thomas' Travel Stories: with Allenby in Palestine.*

Games fading out, a stentorian voice, music: the ingredients of a *grand tour* at the edge of the world. It was not even the East. It was Mars or the Islands of the Phaeacians. It was enough that people listened, that they saw the images, and fantasy would have done the rest. Fantasy is the most powerful weapon. Even more than dynamite. They would admire this false Arab as a prince of fables and recount his stories to children before putting them to bed, thinking of some faraway places where the war could be a wondrous adventure.

He felt again that impertinent gaze, as a violent caress on the neck. He stiffened his muscles. It was difficult to resist temptation to turn around again.

This time the boy responded with a hint of a smile, aware enough to reveal an unmistakable self-study in front of the mirror. Beauty is an improper weapon.

A little later, that night, he would discover that the boy was Andy Mills and that he had no permanent residence. He was born in Blackpool twenty-three years ago. At twelve, he ran away from home, jumping on a caravan of jugglers, and he arrived at last in York, before they sent him back. To punish him, his stepfather had flogged him until he bled. That day Andy had sworn to kill him, but he contented himself in just going away four years later.

It was like knowing everything even before asking. Sitting in the dark, a few metres away, he recognized the stench of solitude, the same that he carried on himself. Odours of violence cut into the flesh, of ugly thoughts and love denied.

Andy had wandered quite a lot and done the meanest jobs for a bowl of soup. Before discovering the secret of his big, shameless eyes. The fact that they were liked by more than one who was inclined to loosen the purse strings and the flap of his pants had kept him from heavy work. It took the war to get him off the streets: a secure salary and a trip in Europe at the expense of the Crown. For four years the Lancashire infantry was his home. Then on a definitive leave of a few months, he had begun to wander again in the town centre in search of prostitution and fortune.

He rose and reached the side corridor, passing near the boy, almost touching him. He thought that dogs behave in the same way: they leave a trace, a signal. He waited in the lobby, pretending to read the billboard, until he heard steps behind him. He let him approach, looking at him sideways.

“Do you like the show?” asked the boy.

A shrug of the shoulders.

“And you?”

Andy grinned showing his white teeth.

“I never watch a show. I get bored. I prefer to watch the people seated in the stalls.”

Silence. It was clear that the boy was expecting him to say something, but since he did not, he found nothing better than to offer him his hand.

“Andy Mills.”

“Ned Vaine.”

“Do you want to go in for the finale?”

“I’d rather take a walk.”

“As you like.”

They walked, chattering about banal things, as strangers who meet on a train or in a doctor’s waiting room do. Stimulated by some questions, Andy started talking about the war and

his dead companions in France but cut it short. Such talk depressed him; he would have preferred to drink on it.

They found a pub and Ned offered him a couple of beers. He did not drink anything, in spite of Andy's insistence. The boy mentioned having an empty stomach, and he ordered also some bread. At the end the boy was cheerful. He asked point-blank if he had a place to go. Ned said "yes," but first he wanted him to talk more about himself, about his family. In this way he found out about Andy's abusive stepfather and his oath to kill him. The boy's words smelled of ancient hatred. It was still there, under the scars. It would take little to make it surface. Maybe it had already happened in the trenches, maybe a German had paid the price of the deadly wrath of soldier Mills, or a comrade in arms who believed himself smarter than others and had meddled with the rations. It was this that attracted him, the pure hate of a little boy in the hardened arms of a Lancashire infantry man.

He led him across the government district and passed the Abbey, entering a narrow road between the houses.

The studio was on the top storey; it had low ceilings and small square windows.

"It belongs to a friend," he said.

He was leaning against the doorframe, his face covered by shadows. Andy took off his jacket and went to the window to look at the pinnacles of the Houses of Parliament.

"A rich friend?"

"He is a famous architect."

The boy did not stop looking out.

"What does he build?"

"He designed the Bank of England."

"He must be rolling in cash. . ." Andy broke off, as if a thought had suddenly crossed his mind. "Why didn't you want to watch the end of the show?"

Ned smiled. "I've already seen it."

Andy turned around but did not say anything. In his short life he must have met even stranger chaps. He could not be easily amazed. The man watched him measure the spartan ambience with his eyes, then approach the desk, lightly touch the inlaid handle of the paper knife and a stack of sheets with nervous handwriting on them.

"Please don't touch." The voice betrayed a tone of anxiety.

The boy turned around again to look at him. Ned was just more than a part of a shadow in the corner of the room.

"What do you want to do?"

Ned did not move. Andy took a step forward, but he stopped, sensing his reluctance.

Suddenly the air in the office became dense and hard to breathe. Ned could smell panic. His own. He imagined a gigantic demon slip out the belt from his pants and crack it on the back of a little twelve-year-old boy. The screams emerged from the well of time up to that room. The blows on the spine and on the side ringing like a death toll. The images were confused, the man had the features of a non-commissioned Turkish officer. The known taste of blood: he had bitten the inside of his cheek. He squinted and took a breath, his stomach curled up like a piece of paper. He felt exhausted.

Andy was waiting for an answer.

“In the desk drawer there’s some money. Take it and leave, please.”

He tried to hide the tremor in his right hand that was now going up his arm. Andy seemed confused, but he recovered quickly. He only needed a glance to count the bills and be satisfied. He headed towards the exit without asking anything else. Ned shrunk against the wall to let him pass, as if he wanted to become one with it.

“If you change your mind, you will find me in the Garden.”

The door closed with a mournful thud that reverberated in his chest.

After some time, he detached himself from the wall and slid to the window. The humming noises of the city were distant, sirens of ships on the river, automobiles along Whitehall.

The punishment would not have been sufficient to fill the loss: no more than the solitude that wrapped around him.

His hand began to tremble harder. He tried to hold it with his left, but instead of subsiding, the tremor spread to the whole body, forcing him to bend over the desk. The papers flew to the floor. Leaning on his elbows he grabbed the paper knife, and with a muffled cry, stabbed his hand.

The trembling ceased.

He collapsed in the chair and watched with dimming eyes the blood dripping on the table.

2. Robert

The faint light was close. A passage or crossroad of arcades, where one must try to get oriented. Far away, the laugh of a machine gun. Suddenly the light expanded, a gust of wind brought a smell of putrefaction. The arcades went everywhere, piles of bones, bodies in shreds, limbs thrown in bulk. Through the gas mask, he saw the shadow approaching, then a twinge between the shoulder blades and the chest left him breathless. He pulled off his helmet and observed the trace of red bubbles at the tip while it came out of his flesh. Then they got higher and burst like a cluster of small shrapnel.

Welcome to No Man's Land, captain.

Someone started to scream.

He barely opened his eyes, he could not breathe, he coughed.

Nancy was standing in the room and cradling a baby crying furiously.

"Do you think little ones have bad dreams?"

It was typical of Nancy to start talking point-blank as if they have been arguing for hours.

Robert reeled, waiting for his heart to resign itself to stay in his chest. He mumbled something incomprehensible and let his memory flow under his shirt, to the scar and the first time he was dead. Vague words followed him while he turned to the present.

Captain Graves, honourably wounded.

He lay staring at the ceiling. The crying ceased, and a little later she returned to lie by his side.

"You haven't answered me."

"I don't know," he just managed to say.

"I think they dream just like us."

He put his arms around her.

“I had that nightmare again.”

“Then it must be hereditary. I could hate you for this.”

Nancy never asked anything about the war. After the death of her brother she closed her mind and did not want to hear any talk about it at all. Perhaps a good wife would have pitied him, but not she: Nancy was not a good wife, and she wanted to make that clear. She was a woman. Jenny would not be raised with terrifying war stories, and not even the creature that she carried within herself. There was need for quiet and oblivion, of colours and serenity. The nightmares had to remain outside the door of the small cottage on the hill.

Robert loved her also for her imagination, for the stubborn enthusiasm in building their life every day, without compromise and without stopping the fight for her beliefs.

His hand touched her belly. She had begun to swell.

“It’s a boy.”

Nancy turned her head around to kiss him.

“You’re afraid to end up in the minority, admit it.”

Robert laughed. He always tried to linger half-asleep, lulled by the awareness of his wife’s warm belly. An atavistic sensation that dulled the senses and sublimated the drives. A truce before adult existence reclaims the assaults of chaos and noise. Or just a way to put off the moment of being exposed to events. It was an inert emptiness, as before the whistle that launches everyone out of the trenches. In war everything turned on an instant, any forward action could become a return to the cold womb of the earth which would have received them maternally, even one piece at a time if necessary, to fertilize the century with their blood.

He summoned up courage and got up. Before heading to the bathroom, he stopped by the crib where Jenny slept, quiet again. He touched her cheeks with a finger and walked away cautiously.

The rigid sequence of actions and thoughts were the only ways to face waking up. He turned to pour the cold water in the basin and washed away the sleep from his face. Still dripping, he stopped to return the gaze of the man in the mirror. The eyebrow that preserved the splinter of the grenade gave him a grim and harsh appearance. The boxing jaw suggested a good right punch. The crooked nose, a rugby accident. A spacious forehead, many thoughts. Eyes grey, almost transparent. A face is a biography, he thought.

He had again dreamt of the tunnel. Again the land of the shadow. The peace in Paris did not placate the fighters’ souls.

Noises from the kitchen announced that the nanny was also awake. He drove out the ugly thoughts with a cough. He had to hurry if he didn’t want to be late for class.

He went out of the cottage into the cold air. The sun was hobbling behind the Masefields’ house, becoming red between the trees in the garden. The shack where John Masefield wrote during the day was barely visible in the midst of the leaves.

Necessity lets the doubts go away, but the brain keeps them intact. A rent of three sterling pounds a month was more than the price of a favour. It could also be pity, or rather compassion, for how the war had wrecked his nerves, for a wife pregnant again, or still for some dark sense of guilt. And yet Masefield had shared the swamp by choice with the Red Cross on his chest. He had seen in their eyes the future betrayed, a generation swept away in a few hundred steps, the fearful gazes of those condemned to death, those whom rum and rhetoric did not persuade to throw themselves at German machine guns. He had narrated this. He wrote about this. Next to his name the word *honesty* had a precise sense. Now peace was everything for him, together with the respect of schedules and courteous manners. After all, peace was the password for every human entrenched in Boar's Hill.

The inhabitants in the surrounding areas called it Parnassus.

In the middle of a patch of trees, rose the home of Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate—a croaking and abrupt old man with a sharp gaze. He liked to pretend to be the patriarch of the refugee clan up there, licking its wounds.

Nichols lived a little further away, together with his inseparable little black hat, without which he did not seem capable of writing one single line.

Siegfried Sassoon had preferred instead to escape the chaos of London and direct the literary section of *The Daily Herald*, faithful to a new mission for the Labour Party. He would go to Oxford once a month and on that occasion the group was complete.

Well, not really. Owen's chair had remained empty. The war had hit him with the ultimate blow at the eleventh hour when he seemed to have escaped the danger. A loss that weighed heavily over the clan and was painful to remember.

He crossed the street and entered the narrow path between the little villas.

He passed by the Blundens' cottage. Their roommate, Mrs. Heavens, greeted him from the flower bed which she took care of with obsession.

"How is your wife, Captain Graves?"

"Fine, thanks. The belly is growing big."

"And the little one?"

"Growing big, too. Faster than I can imagine. Please tell Edmund that I am waiting for him in the city."

He would have come back with Ed that afternoon, as he often did, to tell him everything Nancy did not want to hear. In reality, it could happen that both remained prey to a paradoxical aphasia of poets. They would pass the afternoon looking down from the precipice of their existence, challenging vertigo, searching to catch at the bottom a tingling of life. They would measure the empty spaces where once there were arms, legs, hands. They would count in silence the empty seats on trains, at offices and work desks.

Ed’s lungs were poisoned by gas, his soul by the war and recent grief. He would drink sherry, or whisky, one sip after another, methodically. Sometimes he did not wake up in time for the lectures. His wife had reacted more bravely to the death of their newborn. It happened in August. For the funeral Edmund had written verses that cut like nails in the flesh.

As he walked on, Robert wondered about the brotherhood among those who had known the trenches. It was that collective *we,* which they would still keep for the worst moments. Even when they raged against the band of neurasthenics who lived on Parnassus, that is, against themselves, former soldiers-turned-writers looking for Ariadne’s thread to bring them back to the valley, among the civilians.

Naturally, Apollo was living on the peak, surrounded by the Muse. Sir Arthur Evans, the great archeologist, built his house to get the best view. In the summer he let the boy scouts camp on his land. For them he built an entire pavilion. In the summer nights one could see the bonfire.

He went down at a good pace, not caring for the moist dirt that clung to his soles. The shortcut along the Ridgeway, was not for him. Milk trucks would pass by, some solitary automobiles, and he would find himself squatting against the hedge, his hands on his ears, his teeth clenched, waiting for the torture to end. Better go through the mud of the fields. The cows were silent and shy observers; by now they were used to see him pass by the watering troughs. And there was the view. That view. A little before reaching the farm, halfway along the path, he would always pause for a few minutes to contemplate the Thames’ valley. Even that short indulgence was part of the rigid rhythm that marked the descent.

With his eyes he searched for the tree immortalized by Matthew Arnold on the grass above him. The poet's verses from “The Scholar-Gypsy” opened his lips.

Screened is this nook o'er the high, half-reaped field (line 21).[i]

Nature was not a source of inspiration less rich than the war. One had to try. Nancy would illustrate the words with the light touch she was capable of. He caught sight of the skyline of buildings on the horizon. Bells were greeting the morning.

And the eye travels down to Oxford's towers (line 30).

Here they are, down there. Professor Murray would be understanding; he, too, was also an inhabitant of Parnassus and knew that even Euripides would look for inspiration in this piece of land. He walked towards the city again, and only when in view of the houses did he consult his watch: At St. John’s they were finishing breakfast.

3. Jack

I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each, to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem.

When the chalk finished scratching the blackboard, the translation stood out side by side the original Greek. Professor Murray sat at the desk and cleared his voice.

"On the first pages of Aristotle's *Poetics*, hardly a dozen words find their equivalent in English. Each sentence has to be unpacked, reduced to its minimum phonemes, and then reconstructed to recover a meaningful logic. No translation can resolve this problem easily. It is a work for a teacher who knows Greek very well."

The professor surveyed the audience. Someone in the first row feigned a flattering smile, while he remained very serious. The classroom was quieter than a cemetery. The persuasive voice continued.

"There's a second difficulty that derives from this. To understand a great foreign work through translation is possible only if the two languages share the same set of ideas and belong to the same period of civilization." Without pausing, he placed the pens on the table in a way that they were aligned with the book. "But between ancient Greek and modern English there's an ocean of human history. No translation that aspires to have any meaning in English can duplicate the style of Aristotle."

He stopped. Even from the last row, they could see his frown. He touched the pens again, not happy with their arrangement.

“More than once I’ve toyed with the idea that a ruthless literal translation would be preferable.”

He stood up and returned to the board.

“We know that the Greek word *poiesis* originally means ‘making.’ And the word *mythos* has a literal rendering in the word ‘myth.’ Therefore, the beginning of the *Poetics* can be translated thus.”

He erased the words and wrote in the gaps. He read with the rod pointing to the text.

“I propose to treat of *making* itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each, to inquire into the structure of the *myth* as requisite to a good *making*.”

He tried to adjust the robe over his shoulders but he got its hem dirty with chalk powder. He quickly cleaned it up with his hand, but he succeeded only in smearing it. He gave up the task, wrapped in a white cloud that made him look like an alchemist after some failed experiment.

“Each translation is a trick. Word of a translator,” he said.

The disappointment brought out his Australian accent.

“If you want to understand something of what we’ll study this year, you have to know ancient Greek well.”

He sat down again and started to pack away the books in the briefcase. But then, remembering something, he cast a glance at the classroom

“Good day, gentlemen.”

The students stood up to get to the exit. They did not want to be surprised by the storm. All morning they had watched from the corner of their eyes the clouds thicken and swell and loom low over the lawn. Now they were snarling threateningly at the college spires and pointing at their bellies.

Jack felt the warning signs of a migraine and followed the flow, trying not to appear more nervous than he was already.

Moran came to his side smiling slyly. Jack pretended not to see him but knew that he would not have escaped him.

“I prefer him when he reads Euripides. Also, if he keeps that dressing style, he’ll confirm the stereotypes of colonials’ untidiness.”

They had reached the corridor.

“Is this a reproach or a gesture of solidarity?”

Moran shrugged.

“We will be colonials only for a little longer, Lewis.”

Jack made a lazy gesture.

“To the devil with Michael Collins and all the damned Sinn Féin. To them, the Kaiser should have won the war.”

A cruel sneer appeared on Moran’s face. Jack believed that physiognomy reveals something about character: the sharp features of Moran’s face and the thick black eyebrows gave him a constant menacing expression.

“*Mors tua, vita mea*,” rebutted Moran. “One day Michael Collins will have a monument in every public square in Ireland.”

Jack did not want to engage in this discussion. He was restless and had a dry throat. He coughed. The words came out muted and choked.

“You can’t think that a clandestine war is honourable.”

“It’s the only one possible for the Irish. As soon as the English leave, all problems will be solved.”

Eric Moran was relentless when he talked about the troubles at home. He was a staunch Fenian, one of those who had not wanted to enlist, stubborn as only an Irishman can be. Jack knew something about this.

“You are brave to be talking about secrecy, Mr. Two-Faced Janus,” Moran teased him. “One of these days I will follow you to your hiding place and find out your secret.”

Jack decided to change the subject.

“What do you think of Murray’s translation?”

“You are the poet. You tell me.”

They arrived at the exit.

“I don’t see how myths have to do with facts.” A thunder stroke made him jump. “See you.”

He left the building almost running.

At the second thunderclap, the contour of things swayed, fear became a spider that was climbing up along the back. A moment later, raindrops hammered the cobbled stones. A strong ticking, a shaking of the bones, teeth chattering, and cartridges bouncing off. The shivering ran over Jack in waves. Other blows from on high, the roar became stronger. He ran for shelter under a ledge. Now the noise was deafening, a burst of gunfire, flickering light split the sky. He found a corner to crouch down in, knees to chest, hands over head.

Open the gates for me. Open the gates of the castle. Let me enter.[ii]

He seemed to hear someone near, but he did not dare look. Since he returned from the front, storms brought phantoms with them.

Paddy, is that you?

He peered through his fingers and saw Germans advance with hands up in the air under the college campanile, which looked exactly, nevertheless, like that of a French church.

Don't shoot, Englishman, don't shoot.

He saw prisoners' faces splattered with mud and tears, as they surrendered to an eighteen-year-old boy.

The voice of the captain.

Very well done, second lieutenant Lewis. Very well done.
He felt the urge to shout.

Paddy, I've kept my promise, you know? I kept it.

Paddy? Paddy?

The noise had ceased. He raised his head. The West wind drove back the clouds towards the coast. The storms slowed down, sweeping over the countryside. There was really someone, a few steps further away. A man, soaking wet. Hands and back close to the wall. They looked at each other. Then the other moved, uncertain on the legs.

He could have been a few years older. Perhaps one from the advanced courses, or a scholarship holder. Thin and lanky, his eyes grey and anxious.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

A deep voice, still shaken by the thunder.

"Yes . . . what I cannot stand is thunderstorms. . ."

". . . the horns, the train sirens, the loud and sudden noises," he winked at him. "We are members of the same club."

They shook hands cautiously, like acrobats on a rope stretched on top of their embarrassment.

"Robert Graves, Royal Welch Fusiliers."

"Clive Staples Lewis, Somerset Light Infantry. To friends I'm Jack."

"You attend Classics, right?"

"Yes. . . Graves the poet?"

The other passed a hand through his wet hair.

“What remains of him after the universal deluge.”

“Unbelievable.”

“That we are not drowned? You can say that again.”

“No, I meant . . . ‘1915’[iii] is one of my favourite poems.”

“Glad to know that.” The rope loosened, the embarrassment swallowed them both.

“To tell the truth, now I’m trying to write on another matter. The war is over, after all.”

He did not seem very convinced of what he said.

“Yes,” Jack replied in the same tone.

“Well, see you later.”

Jack watched him moving away in a hurry, the lopsided gait. When he was far away, he realised that he had not said anything about himself. He had not said that he was an initiate knocking at the door of the holy circle of the poets. Nor about the collection of his poems that Heinemann had deigned to publish the year before. *Open the gates for me. Open the peaceful gates of the castle. Let me in.* For now they remained closed: *Reveille* had devoted little space and no criticism to his poem. The pages were all for them, the best poets of his generation: Owen, Sassoon, Graves, Blunden and the others.

Lewis looked at him growing smaller at the bottom of the street until he disappeared round the corner. He picked up his bag of books and walked away. The panic attack was gone as quickly as it had come. The sensation of vulnerability remained.

He crossed over Magdalen Bridge, glancing briefly at the rowers who cleaned their boats underneath branches of willows. Ten minutes at a good pace and the suburbs welcomed him, placid and neutral like Switzerland. Two-storey houses, one attached to the other, crouched inside tiny courtyards. Lives that flowed parallel to one another, fading away in the horizon, good morning and good night until the end of time. He arrived in front of a green gate. He looked around with forced indifference, and entered.

4. Reading

The telephone rang in the room.

One time.

Two.

At the third, one man approached and lifted the receiver.

“Hogarth speaking.”

He stepped down from the train pressing his hat down on his head, because of the wind and rain that assailed him as he placed one foot on the platform. The shivers convinced him to wait for his connection at the tavern. Holding his travelling bag tight with his good hand, he walked along the platform to the small pub. Inside, there was a stinking odour of staleness and old upholstery, in addition to the indifferent glance of the innkeeper: he who sees humanity travelling from a fixed point and has by now stopped asking where everyone is going.

He sipped a cup of coffee, raising his eyes occasionally to look at the infrequent comings and goings outside. He always liked train stations, they were crossroads of lives, temples of Chance. You cannot know who you will meet in the station, nor what train you will board. Traveling salesmen with standard bowler hats, mothers with children hung around their necks, porters and engine-drivers smeared with grease, all pressed together in a small area no bigger than a few square metres.

He thought he could have taken any train blindly and disappeared, becoming someone else from somewhere else. Letting the world forget him would be the best way to bury failure. What a waste of energy. In Paris he had been a mosquito among elephants. He even disguised himself to please the reporters. The American, Lowell Thomas, had made a circus show of it.

He had made himself ridiculous; he had only managed to record the memory of his infamy on those pages locked in his suitcase. The Gospel of Judas.

He thought of the time stolen for recording these memories in notebooks, between one reunion and another, between one private meeting and a public breakfast, on the spur of the moment, running off to finish before the last border in the world would close. The pride of people does not turn on and off like an electric lamp. The accounts settled at Versailles were all wrong, and the old masters of peace would find that out very soon.

The loudspeaker announced the direct train to Oxford. The wound on his hand began to throb again.

The telephone ring resounded clear in the silence. The only person who occupied the room lifted his head from the sheets of paper and looked at the device with the air of someone who wonders about the nature of a mysterious object. He waited for it to ring a second and a third time, then stretched his hand.

"Hogarth speaking."

He dialed the numbers as if in a trance, breathing in the receiver, hoping that someone in that office would answer his Mayday, that a known voice would tell him again what was better to do. If only he had a direction he would have started running. He found himself in a dead zone, outside the course of events, looking at others from behind a glass. He rammed it furiously, with his fists and brow. Blows that resounded, muffled, far away. One time. Two. At the third someone lifted the receiver.

"Hogarth speaking."

"I've lost those damned sheets."

"But who is speaking?"

"They stole the manuscript."

"Lawrence? Where did this happen?"

"At the Reading Station, in the pub, it was in the luggage. I left it there."

"Did you go back to look for it?"

"Everywhere. It disappeared."

"You kept your notes, I hope."

"The notes. . . yes."

"You just have to get back to work."

"How?"

"You don't want everything to be lost?"

“But it is already lost.”

“Stay calm, please. Where are you now?”

“I’m still here, at the station.”

“Take the first train and meet me at the Museum. We have to talk.”

The communication ended. He walked back to the platform slowly and found himself on a bench without remembering sitting down. His hand hurt, the bandage was dirty. He felt strangely lighthearted, relieved, as if a burden had been lifted off his slender shoulders. Nothing would depend on him anymore; the story could continue in his absence. This was what he wanted, to find quiet, if ever it had been possible. To wipe out the mourning.

He realised that he was freezing. He decided it was not important and remained sitting, nursing the intimate hope of remaining like this forever. A monument of flesh and bones to the lonely traveler.

5. Ronald

The trail disappeared in the ice. The monster sought his element. To find him was a task worthy of Beowulf and the fearless Geats. Half horse and half whale, with sword-like fangs, the creature could move at will in the ocean and on land.

The Old Saxons called him *Horschael*. The name reached the island on Viking ships. *Hrosshvalr* or *Rosmhvar* was the name given to him by the Norse: the sea horse, the amphibious whale. To find him one needed to cross the North Sea to the Norwegian fiords, where he usually hid. Over there, one could see his black back breaking the coastal waves. The animal would escape when hearing the oars battering on the water; he would swim towards the polar circle, where the icebergs blockaded the keels of the whaling ships. On the peak of the world, the Lapps called him *Morsa,* a sacred animal to respect and fear. But the pursuit spread beyond, round the North Cape and reached Finland. In Finnish the fanged chimera was called *Mursu.* On the flat

rocks, now exhausted, she awaited the blow of the hero, who from the prow hurled the harpoon and pierced her, splitting her heart.

The pen hit the pen holder and knocked it over on the table. The noise made everyone turn. Professor Bradley's eyes searched the room to find out who was responsible.

Ronald rushed to pick up his pencil and continued to work. The afternoon light was fading. He looked at the clock: a quarter of four. He had spent too much time on the etymology of the word *walrus*. He had followed it up to the North Pole. Besides, he even described in detail *waggle*, "to shake," already dreading to get into the infinite meanings of *want.* A ream of papers thick with notes covered the desk. Most were rolled up or crumpled. Hypotheses, attempts to go down unknown paths. About the walrus he ventured a good six. It helped him endure the boredom of that compilation work.

On the other hand, Bradley was in a rush; the last letters of the *Dictionary* had to be finished within a year. He had already had to wait too long: for the war to end, "for the civilization of words to reclaim its sovereignty over the barbarity of arms," for the work team to fill in the deficiencies inflicted by the Kaiser. Ronald was there for that. And because, in spite of his slowness, he was good. Bradley knew it. Few young collaborators were masters of the Norse language like him. Also, he was there because they paid him: with a family to raise, it was nothing to sneeze at.

Ronald loved words, but in a personal and peculiar way. They were arcane, riddles to be solved, containing tales that embraced centuries and continents. Each word suggested many others, perhaps never pronounced, but very plausible, even denser in meanings and cross-reference, and therefore truer. But between those walls one could not push too far, there was a limit not to be trespassed. From the point of view of the founders, the *Oxford English Dictionary* ought to be the milestone of the British civilization, the sum of what was said in English and of how it was said from the dawn of time until the modern age. Fantasy was to remain outside the door.

"Words, words, words" was Bradley's favourite quotation. He repeated it so often that at times he did not even notice it; he would do it absentmindedly to himself. Ronald could not stand Shakespeare. He found it incredible how many entries Shakespeare would require, as if he had wanted to use all possible words. A true usurper of language, voracious and greedy.

Some stood up and took their leave, quietly waving. The greyness of the halls affected behavior: speaking in a low voice, moving as little as possible. Ronald had adapted.

He exited from the old section of the Museum, allowed to the compilers of the *Dictionary* to complete the great work. Broad Street was still clear of the comings and goings of the robes and starched collars that would fill it within an hour. He walked it all the way to the corner and then headed home. At the next intersection, he stopped to admire the new Ashmolean Palace, which stood white on the side of Beaumont Street. The stairs, the neoclassical lines of the building, the pediment, supported by four Ionic columns—every detail added to the glory of the one who, thanks to his fame, had convinced the university to transfer its Museum here. Sir Arthur Evans would have been content with nothing less as a house for the knick-knacks of King

Minos which he had excavated with much care. Archeologists and classicists reigned sovereign in the New Oxonian Arcadia. For them palaces were constructed. The philologists had to make do with decommissioned buildings.

He directed his steps to the Museum. For some time he made this a habit, a detour before heading home, an innocuous secret.

At that time, the rooms were deserted, a few minutes before closing. At the entrance, the custodian saluted him, raising his hand to his visor. For some obscure reason, he thought he was in the artillery, a comrade in arms, and so he let him stay for a few minutes after hours. Ronald had been enlisted in the Lancashire Fusiliers, but he was never presented with the occasion of clarifying the custodian's mistake; therefore he could indulge himself without feeling guilty.

He passed by the Minoan collection and dashed upstairs. When he entered the hall, he felt a tingling in his neck. The illumination of the display cases was the only remaining source of light. The great octagonal glass case dominated the centre of the room. From a distance it was already a wonderful scene to see them arranged on an inclined plane, almost forming an arrow pointing upwards. Rings. Shapes and sizes were very varied: angels and dragons, crosses and coats of arms, pearls and precious stones. They belonged to popes, bishops, Italian princes. Circles that encased pacts between humans, power connections, the significance of an immortal faith. Some sealed a conjugal commitment that outlived the lovers themselves, and perhaps they concealed words carved on the inside.

He pressed his face against the glass case to see them better. The small band of gold worn on his finger was a poor thing compared to the pomp in front of him. He thought of Edith, of how much he loved her. He felt guilty and wanted to run home.

Turning, he startled and almost bumped into the glass case. Someone was on the threshold, a hardly lit silhouette. A small creature, even much shorter than he, with a big head. He remembered the illustration of a *goblin* in a book of fairy tales from his childhood. He shivered exactly like back then, as if the page was before him.

"Excuse me," said the small man. "I thought nobody was left here."

He approached with small and delicate steps. Ronald watched him peer over the glass case. He had deep blue eyes that caught the light.

"I often try to imagine who wore them on the finger."

He seemed to allude to a discussion begun earlier. Here it is, someone who shared his secret.

"Men who carried the weight of power," said Ronald.

For a moment the other appeared deep in thought. "Who knows if everyone was up to it."

"I imagine not. Power corrupts," Ronald gave a cough. "I think that the Museum is closed."

“Oh, I’m not a visitor,” responded the other, his eyes on the collection of rings. “And not even a thief,” he winked. “I had an appointment with the director. Do you come here often”?

“No,” lied Ronald. “Do you?”

“I used to come here before the war. Pardon me,” he said showing his right bandaged hand and offering his left. “My name is Lawrence.”

Ronald responded appropriately.

“Tolkien.”

“You’re late. Dinner is cold.”

Ronald placed his briefcase on the chair near the entrance, kissed his wife and allowed her to take off his overcoat.

“Sorry. I was caught up.”

Little John ran to him risking stumbling and demanded to be picked up. His childish laughter took Ronald away from the dreamy air he had brought back from the hall of rings. He joked for a few minutes with his son, then he sat at the table. Facing him, Edith watched him eat in silence. She spoke only when he was finished.

“Would you like to tell me what happened to you?”

6. Mother Nature and Mars

"Why are Bolsheviks all right and pacifists not?"

Edmund was not passionate about politics, but he liked to catch Robert out, playing with his own arguments.

They sipped beer from a big, dark bottle, sitting on the balcony, enjoying the remainder of the afternoon through the stained glass door.

"The Bolsheviks are not against all wars, they fight in class warfare, instead of speaking about it at tea time in Bloomsbury."

"They have endorsed unilateral peace, they have given up. And when Siegfried tried to do the same, you stopped him."

Robert lifted the bottle to measure the level of the liquid.

"Do you think *beaux gestes* create a revolution?" He gestured towards the East. "Beside the approbation of the finest spirits at Garsington Manor, all that Siegfried could achieve was a cot in prison. I tried to avoid it because I like him."

"Maybe he wanted to set an example for others," insinuated Ed.

"You mean a martyr. God forbid. No one would have followed him."

Robert still felt the bite of the old anger, at the thought of allowing himself to be coddled by Lady Ottoline and her court of illustrious heads. Not for more than a quarter of an hour, but it was sufficient.

Ed downed a beer and looked straight ahead.

"Haven't we all been a little? Martyrs, I mean. Why did you enlist?"

"To avoid Oxford," Robert laughed at himself. "The course for cadets was a good excuse to postpone the university."

"And later?"

"It was too late. The commitment was made."

“Siegfried did not resign,” insisted Ed. “But he remained alone and at the end they returned him to the fold. Rather, to the slaughter.”

Robert did not take the bait. Both knew that the problem of Siegfried was acquiescence towards his own suggestions. He was a romantic. In ’17 he was fascinated by Bertrand Russell and the circle of intellectuals who used to frequent Garsington Manor, the residence of Lady Ottoline Morrell a little outside Oxford. They had urged him to write a declaration objecting to the war addressed to the High State. A totally honourable action to the last line, of course, but Mr. Russell ended up in jail for a few months, while Lieutenant Sassoon risked court martial. Robert had to bend over backwards to get him a diagnosis of neurasthenia that saved him from the consequences of that action. The commission drank it all in: a period of rest in a clinic, and bad thoughts due to stress would pass.

Obviously, Siegfried did not renege on his words, but at the end he decided to go back to the front with his men. He would not forgive himself for leaving them to face death alone. Opposing the war without leaving it. This was *Sass*, take it or leave it. Robert understood it all too well, it was the paradox in which all of them remained entrapped and which eggheads like Bertrand Russel would never comprehend at all. Abandoning the troops would have been treachery, like abandoning the more meaningful frontline: between soldiers and all others, those who stayed home.

Then Siegfried discovered political commitment. He embarked on a series of rallies for the Labour Party. A humiliation. Sassoon, the homosexual golf and fox-hunting aficionado sent to declaim his poetry in front of crowds of workers that found it perplexing and laughed at it behind his back. When he learnt about it, Robert cried from anger.

The people wanted to forget quickly and did not know what to do with the rancour of the veterans. The only stirring for revolt among the khaki uniforms, just at the end of summer, resulted in nothing. All over the country there was an uprising involving several platoons, filing in the streets protesting the slow process of granting leaves. A few skirmishes with the police, and the press were already writing about a wave of “Bolshevism, anarchy, drunkenness, and cruelty.” The leaders of the revolt had ended up on trial along with their own sacrosanct reasons. The truth was that the government played for time because they did not want to lose the mass of soldiers in action. Because of the unrest in Ireland, obviously. In June, the Irish Republicans proclaimed independence from the British Empire and established a clandestine government. There were fires of rebellion in the whole island. Even Robert had risked being a casualty. He had spent the last months right up there, and were it not for a stroke of luck, he would not have obtained a leave a moment before the situation degenerated.

“Do you think there will be a revolution also in Ireland?” asked Ed as if he had shared his train of thought.

Robert attempted to stretch his legs, but realizing that they were too long and touched the glass door, he ended up crossing them awkwardly.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Certainly I’d be satisfied if they had some social progress.”

Edmund disagreed about that as well. Robert and Nancy were committed deeply to the campaign for birth control, but it was an abstract liberalism, he said. What is the sense of propagating contraception after a war that has decimated half of Europe? Not to mention the Spanish Fever, brought home from the trenches, which was another blow, as if the Black Reaper turned backward to kill inside domestic walls. And then did not Nancy become pregnant again?

Robert was embarrassed to tell him that this pregnancy was not intended. Ed's son was five weeks old when he died from a bottle of infected milk. So he remained quiet for a long time, until Ed's voice broke the silence.

"Sometimes I think we have taken a big detour to retrace old paths. We are still under the shadow of Mathew Arnold's tree, contemplating the pinnacles of Oxford that surround the quiet English countryside. Meadows and campaniles. How harmonious and ordered nature is. Populated with hardworking and harmless creatures, calm and peaceful like Oxfordshire," he gestured towards the pastures. "Siegfried understood this, you know. That's why he appreciates and publishes my poetry in the newspaper. It is the horror that shows through against the light. One doesn't have to be a modernist to notice bomb craters in the middle of the fields."

"But we can't write about the war forever," rebutted Robert. "I'd like Nancy to illustrate my poems. I want to write for Jenny. There's something ahead of us, the rest of our life, family, and children."

He restrained himself. He apologized.

Ed seemed not to mind. "We are like moles," he murmured. "We have dug our holes in that hill and peeked outside, looking for what is below. Below there's still the war. There are monsters. We pretend not to care, but we are under siege."

Robert turned to observe the profile of his friend, dark and diminutive, the nose prominent, the eyes gentle. He felt the warmth of compassion in his chest. He said that they had a responsibility towards themselves and the one who did not return. They have survived to live. It was not revolution, but it was what they could do.

Edmund Blunden agreed. In spite of everything, they could well be on the way to succeed.

Nancy was on the doorstep of the house with the baby at her neck. Approaching, Robert watched her. A touch of blue paint on her cheek, Jenny on her shoulder, her swollen belly. The little person was a mass of vital energy, reserved for the future perhaps.

He smiled at her.

"You know how Edmund is."

She kissed him on the cheek.

"Still the war, I imagine."

The tone was reproachful.

“Socialism,” he lied.

Nancy planted the girl in his arms.

“She has to eat all the dinner,” she said. “No complaints.”

Robert looked at her flabbergasted.

“Margaret has the afternoon off and there’s still a little light,” Nancy said.

She showed the paint brush from her overalls and left. Before she disappeared into the studio, she turned again.

“The only socialism, Robert, is the equality among genders: same rights, same duties.”

He sighed.

Jenny started crying.

That night Robert could not sleep. It has resumed raining, the humidity caused his scars to hurt. The hammering of the raindrops lulled Nancy, the baby, and the creature in the womb to sleep, unaware of the world.

At the threshold of a quarter of a century, he already had a wife, a daughter, and a second child on the way, a pension from the war, and a study allowance which, in sum, equaled hardly one hundred and twenty sterling pounds a year. Still, he did not know what would happen to him. At fifty, looking backwards what would he see? The war would not be a vivid memory anymore. Maybe it would even move him to smile affably, the smile of a middle-aged man, contemplating himself at twenty.

He told himself that he would have maintained the commitment made with Nancy. He would not have talked to the little ones about what he had been through. There was the poetry, they would have read them when they were grown up, if they wanted to.

Soon even 1919 would come to an end. The decade was closing under the alleged good auspices of the Paris Peace Conference, which had redesigned the world. At Versailles the world had to deal with the collapse of the former empires, all but one, the British, sitting at the winning side of the table; with the guilt and war debts dumped on Germany, an exhausted country that could not honour them even in a hundred years and would have a motive for perpetual rancour. So the page was turned in the name of *Vae Victis,* sweeping the ashes of old Europe under the rug, and all the embers, still burning.

Robert thought that there was no choice; he had to dedicate his life to those living, as he told Ed to convince himself also. He would dedicate himself to a life regulated by enduring cycles like the seasons, not to be content with searching for a refuge in a private county, but to fight on the side of Mother Nature against Mars. The goddess of earth against the gods of Heaven and war. An age-old conflict, harsher than class warfare.

Socialism according to Nancy Nicholson.

He wondered if, in the end, this was not the real contradiction: faith in progress. If Lenin pointed out the direction of History, the ring of life and death was on Lady Proserpine's finger, more powerful than any direction imposed on the world. A cycle that he broke, crossing the door guarded by Cerberus and coming back. He was dead for an hour or a little more, sufficient to catch a glimpse of the goddess waiting for him on the other bank of Lethe, ready to welcome him in her arms of ivory. He opened his eyes in bed in the army camp hospital. Captain Graves was already on the list of casualties on that summer day, but he was still breathing. Half a miracle, since the shell had exploded a few steps away from him and a splinter had pierced his lung.

He dozed off on the armchair and dreamed of being at the entrance of a vast palace. Nancy was near him, her belly enormous, beyond measure, breasts swollen with milk. She handed him a ball of red string and urged him to enter. As soon as he crossed the threshold he found himself in a tunnel that descended into the bowels of the earth and crossed a network of tunnels. They were deserted but still retained the echo of ancient battle, trapped from the dawn of time in this coffin of diamonds and rocks. He fell prey to fear again. The bowels of the earth protected monsters.

7. University College

Benedictus sit Deus in donis suis.

The voice of the student echoed in the silence of the dining hall, over the heads of collegians. This week saying Grace fell to Percy, one of the freshers.

Et sanctus in omnibus operibus suis, responded the Latin professor.

Jack raised his eyes from the plate and surveyed the scene. Percy was standing, purple with embarrassment, trying hard not to make a mistake in pronunciation. He tried to impart a note of conviction to the tone of his voice, managing only to look ridiculous.

Adiutorium nostrum in nomine Domini.

Qui fecit caelum et terram.

Jack suppressed a giggle and received a kick under the table. Darsey stared at him with big brown eyes and closed lips, trying not to follow suit.

The duet proceeded without pause until the final beat.

. . . et nobis peccatoribus vitam aeternam. Amen.

Students and professors responded in chorus.

Amen.

Percy gave out a sigh of relief and fell on the chair as if he had passed an exam. The dinner began. The buzz of conversation invaded the room.

"Do you want us to be ousted?" said Darsey in a low voice, serving himself from the salad bowl.

"Did you hear his pronunciation?" responded Jack.

The other shook his head and feigned a smile, but Jack knew that he did not enjoy teasing the freshers. He was compassionate. Perhaps because he was the son of a schoolmaster and had inherited sympathy for the last in the class and the ugly ducklings. Or more probably because he was one of them, before he arrived here.

The evening meal was one of the least painful events of university life and passed quickly. Jack listened to the chatter across the tables, contributing a few lazy remarks.

After dinner they moved to the Common Room on the second storey, which little by little began to crowd with students.

Jack did not want to engage in conversation and hid himself behind the last collection of Robert Graves' poetry. A sober cover, with small silver letters. *Treasure Box*. He handled the slim volume delicately, letting the image of an old trunk reappear in his mind. His brother Warnie had baptized it "The Treasure Casket." The box was in the attic of his childhood home in Belfast. Jack had impressed in his memory the smell of wood and leather that wafted from it whenever it was opened.

He felt a wave of nostalgia mounting in the distance and tried to concentrate on the verses that he had before him, feeling ridiculous like Percy while reciting the Grace. The quiet face of his mother, still radiant, forced him to wrestle with his memories.

Distressed, he threw them back inside and closed the box, but some managed to escape, unglued pages, a whole volume. *Gullivers's Travels . . . The Story of Sigurd . . . The Fairie*

Queene[iv]. . . fragments of time that shattered at his mother's bedside. He was just a child, then, and already forced to deal with his most painful loss. If a glimmer of that primordial joy had remained alive under the ashes of mourning, the war had taken the responsibility to extinguish it forever. Other deaths to count, friends' faces on the gravestones, and a howling rage against the harshness of life. What had Graves written?

Wisdom made a breach and battered

Babylon to bits: she scattered

To the hedges and ditches

All our nursery gnomes and witches.

Lob and Puck, poor frantic elves,

Drag their treasures from the shelves. ("Babylon" lines 17-23)[v]

It was right that way, thought Jack. Reality did not resemble fairy tales. However strong the temptation to regret that lightheartedness might be, indulgence in it would only bring bitter disappointments.

He shook himself and decided to stop reading. Better leave the company of others when he is in a bad mood. He left the sofa and entered the corridor that led to his room, certain that he would have trouble sleeping.

"Are you asleep, Jack?" asked Darsey speaking to the darkness.

"No," was the response from the other bed.

"Why?"

"I was thinking of Ayers."

"And who the devil is he?" hissed again Darsey in the absolute darkness.

"A sergeant in my regiment."

"Is he dead?"

"A few inches and it would've been me. At this hour he'd be with his wife in Coventry."

"Nobody knows God's plan."

"God doesn't exist, Charlie."

"Do you want to go for a smoke?" suggested Darsey.

Jack welcomed the invitation. They were able to salvage a pair of cigarettes and moved to the Common Room. The fire had been out in the fireplace for some time and it was cold even with a woollen robe on. There was a light at one of the tables.

“Look, here are two other insomniacs.”

Darsey recognized the jesting tone of Moran and grimaced. Charlie Darsey was humble, easy-going, one of those who in school was always trailing after fellows with stronger personalities. Moran’s know-it-all tone could only irritate and make him apprehensive, which he managed to conceal with irony.

It stopped raining, a quarter moon was peeping between the clouds. Jack leaned at the window, his head against the glass which was sparkling with drops, and misting with his breath. Darsey sat down on the lounger.

“What are you reading?” he asked Moran.

He lifted the book, showing the cover with the name of Yeats.

“Our national poet. It seems that he’ll move to Oxford.”

“Why not Wilde?” Darsey provoked him. “He was Irish and he too studied at Oxford.”

“Wilde was a pederast,” declared Moran in a malicious tone and with a surly expression that made Darsey giggle and turn away.

“Hey, Jack,” he said. “If the Irish establish a republic, what would you do? Will you become a citizen?”

Jack shrugged.

“My life is here now.”

“Your father? Your brother?”

“Lately we haven’t had good rapport.”

Moran stood up, pulled the cigarette from Darsey’s fingers and started smoking on the opposite small sofa. He spoke without looking them in the eyes, listening to the sound of his own words.

“You don’t understand. It’s not just about Ireland. At the Paris Conference President Wilson clearly said: self-determination of the people. Do you know what this means?”

“Oh, no, please, not at three in the morning,” objected Darsey.

“It means the empires are finished.” Moran watched the embers of the cigarette with a bored expression, as if explaining the obvious to children. “The other weekend I was in London to see the show about which everyone is talking . . . the one about Lawrence of Arabia.” He noticed the blank expression on the faces of the other two and looked at them askance. “Every once in a while you must get out of here.” He pushed away the air with his hand. “Well, even the Arabs have waged a war of national liberation. Against the Turkish Empire. And if they don’t give them back their country, they will rebel against the British and the French as well. Colonel Lawrence had written this even in *The Times*. He has guts, that one. And guess what?”

“Don’t tell me he’s Irish,” grumbled Darsey.

Moran smiled, self-satisfied.

“You instead, Lewis, where did you pass the weekend?”

The malicious look did not escape Jack.

“Here. As you said, I don’t get out,” responded Jack listlessly.

“Well, not really,” insinuated Darsey, “Since you disappear on Fridays and reappear on Sunday evenings.”

His naïve and complacent attitude irritated Jack. The alliance between those two was as much unexpected as it was improbable. Certainly too much at this hour of the night.

“It’s late,” he said. “I’m going to sleep.”

“Reticence. As usual.” Darsey spread his arms. “You’re leaving me with him? After some time he will start talking to me in Gaelic.”

Moran ignored him.

“You know the story about the guy who in the middle of the Battle of the Somme started speaking in an unknown language?”

“Wait, I have heard it . . .” said Darsey stifling a yawn. “What regiment was it?”

“It changes every time someone tells it to me. The chap, a lieutenant I think, in the middle of bombardment could no longer make himself understood by anyone. It’s one of the strangest cases of trauma caused by an explosion that I’ve ever heard.”

“Maybe it was Professor Murray who spoke Greek,” winked Darsey.

Jack made use of this opportunity and, bowing to the two, went into the bedroom.

From under the covers, he could still hear them arguing. Moran maintained that even the Russian revolution was national but Darsey contested this. Class warfare was based on proletarian internationalism, hence it could not be nationalist. Moran insisted: as a matter of fact, the Russians have liberated the proper regions from a class of tyrants and parasites. The Irish would do the same with the Saxe-Goburg and Gotha. Or Windsor, as they were called since their German origin became inconvenient.

Jack stopped listening and went back to think about poor Ayers. His guts had struck his face, torn by the explosion. The rib cage, hit by the compressed air, was left empty. The shrapnel had even injured Lewis. He almost felt the pain in the chest and side again.

Thanks to the dim light that filtered through the door that was ajar he could survey the room. In a similar place, in a moonlit night he had made the promise. He and Paddy were sitting on the beds, facing each other, in the little room where the cadets gathered after military drill. The university was already empty due to the war, the last call-ups were hanging around in the semi-deserted hall, lessons held for a few. In the afternoon he learnt to march and point a gun,

preparing for the call. He and Paddy were the youngest, awkward in their country uniforms and lost, which was enough to tighten the bond between them against the rest of the world. The imminent departure and news across the channel fanned the fire of their intimacy and pushed them to make an eternal promise. They had shaken hands solemnly like heads of state.

If one of us dies, the other will live also for him.

If one of us dies, the other will take his place.

At eighteen it is tough to take account of death. Jack came very close to it. Paddy was swallowed by No Man's Land a few months before the end of war, like the poet Wilfred Owen.

A leap forward in memory. The walls became white as in a hospital room. White sheets, quick changes from unconsciousness to wakefulness, nurses with cups of hot broth, a delicate hand holding his, the one spared from the splinters. An angelic face of a woman was whispering words of kindness. Her son would never come back, yet it was she who gave him comfort. Jack could not do the same, and the awareness of this choked him.

A little over a year had passed from that day, and his life had totally changed. Keeping the promise of that night was the pledge to be paid as a survivor. No one would ever understand it, not his father, not his brother Warnie. Yet he was sure that if Ayers was replaced by him, Paddy would be in Belfast today, consoling both of them.

8. Lost Tales

Bullets slice the air, burning vegetation and summer flower buds, charring trees already twisted, like broken bones sprouting from the earth. The world is blackened, covered with gases that blind and suffocate. Gigantic dragons of smoke and lapilli rise up to grab men. Flames and claws rip the earth, digging tracks deep like abysses. Metal becomes a rain of red-hot splinters that reverberate over the pale face of the dead. Barbed wires claw at legs, block any retreat, leave the soldiers at the mercy of the poisonous bites of machine guns. Ronald curses the teams of sappers who should have cut the wires. He curses those who have marked the wrong spot on the map. He curses the enemy who re-emerged from the bowels of the world to the swamps of the Somme. That is not the right spot, there is no passage, only iron and death and the orcs waiting for them. The officer approaches him ordering him to relay the command of retreat. Ronald sends a bright flare, provoking a rush as of rabbits to holes, a pack confused and running in all directions. Someone ends up between the jaws of the Germans, others trip over cadavers abandoned for days near bomb craters. Ronald does not turn around, runs up to the trenches, the weight of his backpack throws him off balance, he falls and crawls the last metres. Others crash behind him.

He finds himself face to face with a team of diggers covered with mud. Miners from Wales and Lancashire, devoted to dark and narrow places, their sight accustomed to darkness. The big, callused hands seem able to replace shovels and ice axes, which they also hold like axes, almost as if they were attacking the Germans with those tools. They look at him with cold and squinting eyes. He realises that he has pissed on himself and is talking. He is still sending the orders of the captain, but nobody follows them. Someone calls the sergeant, who comes running, bent forward. Between one cannon fire and another, Ronald repeats the order. They must still launch bright flares for those who are lost in No Man's Land. He receives a confused look. The idiot does not understand anything he tells him. No one does. This is more embarrassing than the dark stain on his pants that is getting larger.

The sense of impotence increases until he falls silent.

Ronald looked down at his notebook and heard the rain which drove away the images of the attack at Ovillers. Sometimes they would assault him suddenly, luckily less than in the first months of his return. In those days he could not do anything except write and write some more. He did not find a better way to tame the monsters if not by transforming them into fairy tale creatures, to be relegated beyond the mirror, into the Fairy Kingdom. The arcane power of language, the ancestral evoking force, allowed it. *The secret of words*. It had been that strange person at the Museum that defined it this way. After all, this was what had pushed him to create a new and, at the same time, an ancient language, idioms of the fairies that Edith adored, the key to accessing the other part of the world.

Lawrence seemed to talk outside of prejudices: a rare quality. He said he was an archeologist. When Ronald revealed to him his own craft, he seemed intrigued.

“A philologist investigates the secret of words, isn’t that right?”

Taken aback, Ronald nodded.

“And what is it, therefore?”

His eyes blazed with a restless light, blue like certain skies in the land of the South. There was no trace of maliciousness in his look.

In that precise moment Ronald found the answer on the tip of his tongue.

“Words give meaning to things. Using a language is building a world. I think this is the secret.”

The other turned to look at the rings in the glass case with a strange smile.

“Like an oath or magical formula.”

Ronald remained serious.

“Like an act of love. It is written that in the beginning was the Word.”

He returned to the notebook, the treasure chest of poems and stories written before the war and during his convalescence. His catharsis, the excuse that did not help at evading the trenches or hospital beds. The reality transfigured in fairy tales was compressed in these lost tales and was searching for a way for their possible return. Fables, myths of an imaginary period. Too much for a century of technique and disenchantment. The dreams broke on the barbed wires of “the war that will end all wars.” This was the ultimate fable, who could want any other? The new buzzwords were “modernism,” “realism.” Yet there was a time before the Catastrophe when dreams were real, when the world had been, if not better, at least nearer to the primeval light. He wrote of this, and doing so, he realised he could not but narrate the ineluctable fall of myth into history and of his own youth into adulthood.

He passed his hand over the cover and read the title at the top in Edith's handwriting: *The Fall of Gondolin.*[vi] He had written this story between spells of fever. Edith had insisted on transcribing and correcting his illegible writing. He would keep it in a rough copy, to be able to continue revising it. He always thought that each sentence could be enhanced, refined, maybe even a little, but in a way that would echo on the whole page. Also today he could take advantage of a more lucid and detached vision, the war was over, the memories had sifted through the sieve of distance.

The story recounted the siege of a stronghold and the courageous defenders who sacrificed their lives in an attempt to save it. The survivors would have brought the seed of pale hope with them. Tattered, ragged, they were escaping from the city like Aeneas from burning Troy, incredulous that they were still alive, the mind hanging in balance between the affections left behind and the search for a new path.

Where to go after a cataclysm of this kind? At the end of the long night would a morning star rise to show the way?

He had faith, the love of Edith and little John: It was more than what many people could hope for, and ordinary life left him no room for too much fantasy. There was the rent of the new house that needed to be paid regularly despite its small space. They lived with Edith's cousin, who helped with the child, but Edith had also insisted on hiring a maid in charge of the kitchen. Then there was John, to feed, to clothe, and to take care of. Money was spent at a shocking speed. To supplement the stipend from the *Dictionary*, Ronald was forced to give private lessons in Old English. An activity which made the small house on Alfred Street still more crowded and time never enough. One way or another, there was very little time left for writing.

He smiled, thinking that at first, just as he returned from the front, when Christopher had urged him to start, he wanted to compose the missing mythology of England. Nothing less. It seemed to him a task worthy of the *gravitas* of the moment, but maybe it was only his wish to find a place for the language of the elves. Months had passed since his last effort, absorbed with work and domestic affairs. He read the notebook often, adding glosses and messing around with names and etymologies, but little by little the daily routine dried up his wit.

He closed the notebook and pushed it away, feeling the tiredness in his temples. He massaged his eyes and when he reopened them his sight was blurred for a few seconds, the time it took to see two shades standing in front of him. His heart skipped a beat, a wave of strong chills ran over him, hands glued to the table. They were little more than shades, but he recognized the school uniforms, the mocking expression of Rob and the serious frown of Geoffrey. For some reason they appeared young, as in their school days, their features still unlined, their faces clean. They seemed to be waiting.

Ronald shrunk inside the cone of light of the lamp, which wobbled.

He looked again, but the shades had already faded. Fear gave way to a sense of emptiness that swelled like a bubble between the stomach and the throat. It had only happened to him once, a couple of years before, but he had not given it much thought. Among veterans hallucinations were the order of the day. Now he felt shaken and, for some reason, in danger. He made the sign of the cross and prayed for the souls of his old friends, until he felt the warm touch of a hand on his shoulder.

"It is late. Come to bed."

He hugged her waist clumsily. She kissed him on the cheek and a whisper drifted into his ear.

"You need to rest, my sweet Beren."

Ronald smiled, stood up and caressed her small face.

"Only between your arms, luminous Lùthien," he said, while he pulled her to him, looking beyond the soft head of hair.

9. Galahad

Ned observed the shape of his mother silhouetted against the lit window and imagined her every gesture. The cutlery set near the plates, the doilies, a bundle of heather in the hand-painted vase. In the past years, far from home, he had forgotten how much she was tied to the small domestic rituals. That woman used to break up life into rigid sequences of simple and clean actions. Not even the death of her own loved ones was successful in affecting her mindset; rather, it pushed to reaffirm it. The last one to pass away, a few months before, was the father of her sons. She had taken care of him until the end, when the fever got the upper hand on his tired body.

The news of this agony had reached him in Paris in the hall of The Majestic. He remained immobile, in the middle of the comings and goings of diplomats, secretaries, government functionaries of half the world. The President of the United States of America expected him for a private meeting. Feisal was ready, at the top of the marble staircase, in his most elegant suit. They exchanged a courteous look, the face of the Prince revealing that he knew of the devastating news. Nothing was left but to make the best of a bad situation and lock the trauma in one of the cells of the mind. One could not let Woodrow Wilson wait.

The day after, he crossed the English Channel only to find that he had arrived late. So he had thrown away the key to the cell, to prevent the pain from coming out.

He looked at the half-full knapsack. He had passed the whole day a prey to a fierce catatonia. Since he had returned from Paris it was happening more and more often.

Nobody expects anything more from me.

Moving his clothes would not be problem, he had never owned many. He would leave the books there, in the small outbuilding at the end of the garden. Except some. His eyes fell on the worn out and dirty knapsack left in a corner. He had not opened it since. He grasped it, with fear and emotion. He pulled out two books. The covers had by then lost their color, scratched by sand, the pages yellowed and greasy. He let the desert air refill the nostrils. He put everything in the knapsack, inside his clothes, together with a thin book, a collection of poems bought in Cairo during the last trip.

There, he was ready. The street up to All Souls was not long, he would go after dinner.

His mother had not asked about his decision. She may have understood. The house was full of ghosts, the war had emptied it, and he had to isolate himself to do what needed to be done.

You are our Sir Galahad. You cannot disappoint us.

He had made the decision that afternoon, after the meeting with Hogarth. The old mentor was greying, yet he still had strong influence on him, Ned had to give him that. He had observed him long in silence, from the opposite side of the desk, like a father who watches over a battered, prodigious son. He must have noticed the circles under his eyes, the crumpled clothes, the bandage on his hand that began to fray. Ned knew he had the air of someone who had neglected himself, a prey to dark obsessions, forgetting to eat and groom himself. Both knew that this return to report was a cry for help.

He remembered the first time he was in that chair. How many years ago? Ten? He was only a fresher fascinated by the story of the Crusades, who wandered among the display cases in the Museum to remove dust, with the care of one participating in a sacred ritual. A way to get noticed and find an outlet for his intense desire for books and travel. The same desire that pushed him the summer before to cross France on his bicycle, taking pictures of castles. The professor had showed him the way towards the Orient, spreading on the map useful signposts. A challenge. Another trip, another return before that altar, this time with the material for his dissertation.

This afternoon, however, he was empty-handed, unburdened.

“How do you feel?”

“Exhausted.”

“The after-effects of the accident?”

He glanced at his ribs. His last plane trip ended with a breakdown and a tragic landing. The pilot died.

“Some twinges when it rains remind me that I was lucky.”

“You’ll stay here. The book must be rewritten. That’s what we expect of you.”

“No one expects anything more from me.”

“Did you forget who made you who you are? We need texts providing reasons. Things do not happen by themselves, my boy, we have to lay the ground.”

“You don’t understand. Paris was a debacle, I don’t want to have anything more to do with politics. No more Arabs, Zionists. . .”

“The game isn’t over.”

“Do you really believe it?”

“I’m convinced of this. And after all, you believe it too, since you insist on sending reports to the Foreign Office and letters to the newspapers.”

“*The Times* publishes them censored.”

“I know this. The new director isn’t one of us. That’s why you have to write the book. Start from the beginning and do not leave out anything. I have arranged for a scholarship for you to study at All Souls. Do you think you can work with that hand?”

“It’s not the hand. To go back over this experience . . . wears me out.”

“You’re still our Sir Galahad. You can’t disappoint us.”

The sorcerer knew a lot. He knew him for too long. He had noticed his puerile attempt to escape his assigned duty. Without blinking, he had put the pen in his hand and another blank sheet of paper under his nose. Like ten years before when he had suggested leaving again quickly, having just returned from Lebanon, that time to search for a buried city in Upper Mesopotamia, together with Woolley. Those had been the best years.

He closed the knapsack and took a few steps in the room. His father had the cottage built for him, the family genius. The shades of five boys playing in the field and of his father flashed before his eyes, with his father bent behind the tripod to immortalize them. The camera was the only heritage Ned treasured.

A flashback, he saw again tanned fingers fumbling with the lens.

No, wait, you stain it this way.

He cast a glance at the drawers of the desk, where he kept the photographs, but he repressed the insane impulse to take them with him. It was a casket of tears, a reservoir of melancholy that would only make him gloomier.

His mind wandered backward in time aided by the twilight which made it easier to conflate past and present. Ned recalled the time of epic undertakings with his brothers in this garden during summer days. Adventure, battles, precipitous rescues. Time was infinite then, fear unknown, family secrets well-kept in the heart of his mother.

With uneven success, they had tried to become the knights with shining armour that they dreamed about as kids. Today Bob was a devoted and moderate servant of God. Arnie, the

youngest, was still a student and who knew what he would become. Will and Frank had been among the first to enlist and were killed in France.

Then there he was, Ned, who tried everything yet did not amount to anything. He was not an artist. He was not an archeologist. Not even a good soldier. He was considered a war hero merely because the governments flatter those who do the dirty work on their behalf. The medal that should have given him the Order of the Bath remained in midair, between the hands of His Majesty's Secretary. Faced with his refusal to accept the honour, George V had shown disappointment, unaware that he was not the first king to be frustrated by him.

At the moment, Ned did not enjoy better success as a writer, as he had come to hate his manuscript to the point of leaving it in a railway station.

Start again at the beginning, in a new mood.

Perhaps the fame that Lowell Thomas was procuring for him in the theaters of London could come in handy. Hogarth had not mentioned any of this, but one could bet on his having accounted for it. People were buying tickets to listen to him. He was selling "him," the Uncrowned King of Arabia. He who had betrayed everyone, friends, comrades in arms, superiors and underlings, and even himself.

He had become a star.

Sounds and vivid colours spread out. A rain of flowers. Perfumed water and hats launched into the sky. The ruckus of voices turn into a clear shout: "Urens. . .Urens. . . .Urens!" His name mangled through the streets of Damascus by the excitement of freedom.

He returned to the present and spied his image reflected in the glass. According to Hogarth it was up to him to do it, to subvert the order of the winners' history, to continue the guerilla war with other means. They did not lack contacts in high positions, but the undertaking needed something other than politicians.

That afternoon at the Museum, outside of Hogarth's office, he had been struck by a sentence from Tolkien.

Words give meaning to things.

That was the key. They needed words unheard of. A hero was not enough, a poet was needed too. What would Achilles have been without Homer?

The telephone rang. He lifted the receiver.

"Ned," the voice of his mother. "Dinner is ready."

He hung up. He opened the wardrobe in a hurry, pushed aside coats and uniforms, until he found a tunic and a mantle. He caressed their brilliant white, then grabbed both and stuck them in his knapsack, before leaving the cottage and crossing the garden.

They were expecting him, already seated with the dishes served in front of them. Bob hardly deigned to give him a stern look. His mother pressed her hands together.

“Lord, we thank you for the food that you have given us. Amen.”

“Amen,” repeated Bob.

“*Bismi’llāh raḥmāni Raḥīm. ‘Āmīn,*” murmured Ned.

They looked at him in horror and shame, and he quickly repented for having provoked them.

An oppressing sadness overtook him, crunching his shoulders. They had been a large family, at times also happy, although based on a lie. Those who were left did not amount to anything. The thought crushed him and pushed him to eat in a hurry without raising his eyes from the plate. He was itching to leave at the first opportunity.

After dinner he said goodbye to his mother, who kissed him on the brow. He crossed the doorstep of the house, put the knapsack on his shoulders and got on the bicycle. He pushed it by hand to the street. Polstead Road was completely dark except for a single street light. He would reach the town centre by relying on the dynamo.

The call of his brother caught him off guard. He let his brother rejoin him, noticing his gloomy expression.

“Even now you cannot forgive her?”

Ned stiffened.

“She has never shown penance.”

“For what?”

“For hypocrisy towards us.”

Bob sighed, with the same attitude that he assumed when his brothers put themselves in trouble. He was the eldest, and always forced to be the most grown up and responsible. Ned thought that in spite of everything, their relationship was still the same.

“It’s not up to you to judge,” Bob said. “Life was hard for her. She had to bury two sons and a husband.”

“She tried hard to lay a guilt trip on us,” he rebutted with anger. “She had to stick it very deep into our soul.”

“Because she was suffering, Ned. She only had hope in the mercy of God.”

“So we all ended up suffering. Don’t pretend that we haven’t become who we are due to a hidden wound. Don’t pretend that you don’t carry inside a little of this lie.” He noticed the sad and resigned look of his brother. It was futile to be brutal. “Tell her that I wish her well. Goodbye.”

He walked, accompanied by the squeaking of the bicycle. When he got to the intersection, from the corner of his eye he could see his brother, immobile and alone under the street light. He was looking down. Perhaps he was praying.

Lord Dynamite

Oxford, March 1909

Professor Hogarth watches the youth slyly, keeping him on tenterhooks. The blue eyes stand out from the thin face. He does not look twenty at all. He has the small body of a child. He could still have mud on his shoes from racing in the meadows. He looks around, as if trying to identify objects on the shelves. The office is full of them, relics from all over the Mediterranean. Hogarth knows this enchanted look, the same look that he had when Evans dragged him on the greatest enterprise: to find the palace of Minos, to bring it to light after four thousand years. Time passes, and after the wonder of the discovery comes the responsibility of conserving it. Now it is up to him to be the Museum custodian, but tomorrow who knows, perhaps it is precisely the young student who sits in front of him with a stiff back, waiting for his words. He impressed him the first moment, when he found him browsing the halls of the Museum, and he decided to reward his consistency by offering him the position of assistant to the manager of medieval ceramics.

The boy brightens up when the warm voice of the professor breaks the silence in the room.

“So, show me this treasure.”

An old cloth bag is lifted up on the desk. The young man stops, uncertain whether to lay it on the neat surface, waiting for the approval of the professor, who nods. Cautiously, he pulls out a bundle of filthy material. Hogarth lets the boy open it and sees a broken vase, still stained with dirt. There is no expression on the professor’s face.

“Saxon, I would say,” ventures the boy. “Fifth or six century A.D.”

The professor takes a pen and turns the vase around to examine it.

“Where did you find it?”

“On a bend in the Thames. Five miles from here.”

“Are there others?”

“Yes, but in pieces. I think they are from one tomb.”

Hogarth stretches in the chair.

“A tomb,” he repeats, as if to engrave the word in his mind.

“Yes, sir, the tomb of a warrior.”

The blue in the eyes becomes deeper and sparkles. It is clear that he is keeping something and waiting for a dramatic moment. Hogarth thinks that the boy should learn to have patience and value the results borne out of methodology, beyond those of intuition.

“And what makes you think that, my friend?” he asks to please him.

The boy opens the bag again.

“This.”

Hogarth stares at the object in the hand of the other, not able to conceal his surprise. He did not expect it. He has not seen stuff like that since Evans used to dig in the surroundings. He takes the sword from the boy’s hands and examines the stump of the broken blade. The metal is eaten by rust, but it is clear that it was wrought with accuracy. The hilt is light, the decoration still visible, although smoothed out by centuries.

The professor puts on his glasses and turns it around under the light from the window.

“An alloy of iron and carbon. The pummel is silver. The middle layers of the blade form a curly, serpentine motif.” He lifted his eyes. “It is the work of a skilled craftsman. Certainly intended for a warrior of rank.”

He sets the weapon on the table.

“The other half of the blade remained stuck in the rocks during an attempt to extract it.”

Hogarth gives a start.

“Are you kidding?”

“Yes,” smiles the boy, and gestures towards the copy of *Morte D’Arthur* by Malory.[vii] “Unfortunately, it’s not Excalibur.”

“Yes.” The professor relaxes and thumbs through the pages of the book absentmindedly. He is not mistaken, this young man has talent. A rare commodity, which merits certain care.

“How’s work at the Museum?”

“Very good.”

The answer was matter-of-fact. Hogarth nods in a distracted manner. The Anglo-Saxon vases do not have a speck of dust on them and the spread-out maps are in perfect order.

The professor thinks about it for a little bit more, then he decides to go straight to the point.

“What are you interested in, Lawrence?” He notices the surprised look on the boy’s face. “I mean, what *really* interests you?”

The response comes after a few seconds, the time it takes to decide between reticence and sincerity and translating dreams into syllables of words.

“The Orient.”

The grey eyes of Hogarth lock with those of the boy.

“Where it all started,” murmurs the professor. Here it is, the truth that he expected. A chap capable of concealing juvenile arrogance well, but audacious enough to know when to be sincere if necessary. There is something in him, pure gold, a vein that time could dry up or turn into a treasure trove.

“Professor Poole tells me that you’d like to write a thesis on the Crusades. Is this true?”

“Yes, sir.”

“A rather vast topic. Have you considered how to narrow it down?”

“I’m interested in military architecture. I spent the last summers in France examining the Plantagenet castles. I would like to study the architectonic influence of these on coeval buildings in the Holy Land.”

Poole has mentioned that as well, but Hogarth prefers to listen directly to the source. The statement is correct, probably carefully prepared. He allows himself again a few moments for reflection. Now it is his turn to be honest.

“Many years ago, when I was a student like you, someone offered me a great opportunity.” He lets his eyes roam over the relics on the shelves. “I was able to take it, and I am who I am today because I made that decision.”

Lawrence’s face wrinkles with tension, curiosity taking hold of his small, nervous body.

“From what they tell me you are the most brilliant student in your course.” Hogarth points to the rusty sword. “And as far as I see you prefer on Sundays to dig along the river rather than play for the colours of Jesus College.”

Lawrence is attentive, and it is clear that he does not know what to say yet.

“I think you deserve the same chance I’ve had,” continues Hogarth.” If you want to collect material for your thesis, it won’t be enough to go across the Channel. What is your program for summer breaks?”

The voice of the boy is choked with emotion.

“Nothing.”

“What would you say about a trip to the Middle East?”

He swallows.

“It would be fantastic.”

“You should visit the coast fortresses of Palestine and Lebanon. And those of the Syrian outback, obviously. I think I can get a letter of recommendation from Lord Curzon for the Turkish authority so that they grant you the visa and do not hinder your movements. Nevertheless, such a trip at the height of summer could prove to be rather strenuous.”

Lawrence hurriedly replies.

“I don’t think I’m scared of hard work, rest assured.”

“I don’t doubt that, my friend, but it’s better if you consult with others who have travelled to these latitudes before you. I will give you the address of Charles Doughty.”

“Doughty?”

“Yes. You read *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, I hope.”[viii]

“Twice.”

“Very good,” comments Hogarth. “Write to him on my behalf and ask him for any useful advice. He is affable, he will give you any information that he can.” The professor consults a mental list. “You will need to know a smattering of Arabic. Before you leave you can take lessons from Reverend Odeh. He lives here in Oxford, is a Syrian and a good friend of mine. He will do it with pleasure. Also, when in Lebanon, you can call on Miss Farida el-Akle. She lives in Jebail, not far from Beirut, and she teaches Arabic to the European diplomatic personnel.”

Hogarth stops talking. The effect of his words on Lawrence’s face is evident.

“Professor, I . . .”

Hogarth forestalls his embarrassment and places his hand on his arm.

“Go over there, Lawrence, and look for yourself. The Orient is not only the past that we read about in books. History is not a dead letter, we ourselves take a part in it.” He pauses, meditating on what to add, then concludes, “Upon your return we will talk about your future.”

He stands up and stretches his hand across the table. Lawrence takes a moment to realise that he is dismissing him. He gets up and shakes his hand with all the gratitude he can summon.

Hogarth looks at the sword.

“I can’t reciprocate with an equally precious gift.” He grabs Malory's book and hands it to him. “But a good reading can be helpful.”

The boy takes the book and smiles.

“Thanks.”

Hogarth waits until he leaves the office and sits down, the broken sword under his eyes. Without thinking, he holds it firmly and lifts it as if it were still whole.

“Arise, Sir Lawrence,” he murmurs to himself.

10. Colonel Lawrence

His eyes would not go unnoticed. Since the first time they framed him, as soon as their eyes met, Robert realised that they were different from the gentle tone and his unusual, careful way of asking questions. As if he thought he could grasp a fragment of truth in every response. No word was used randomly, not even the name of a most obscure poet.

Meleager of Gadara.

"Who?"

"Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence, the hero of Arabia. There's a reception in his honour, at All Souls College. I wish you would deign to browse through a newspaper every now and then."

"To read what, Robert? That the good old girls don't exist anymore? Or that women's brains are naturally inferior to men's?"

"World news, Nancy. What happens around us."

"I'd like to read about the conditions of working-class women, but no one at *The Herald* appears to be interested in this topic. Why don't you complain to your friend Sassoon?"

"Siegfried edits the literary pages."

"And perhaps he thinks of leading the revolution from it."

"My father asked me to accompany him. He is here on purpose from Harlech. It is an occasion to greet him"

"And to get to know another who shows off the war stigmata. The wives of the English workers are in the trenches all their lives, but no one organizes receptions for them."

"I need to brush up my dinner suit."

“You’re not going in uniform?”

“Stop it, Nancy.”

“Have a great time, Robert.”

Robert crossed the entrance unprepared, still nervous because of the discussion with his father, who instead immediately dived into a *grand tour* of greetings. Robert found himself observing the crowd in the hall as if in a painting, feeling like a visitor in the wrong museum.

Isn’t it time to abandon the youthful enthusiasms?

He made it to the wall, trying not to be noticed. He checked his tie, uncertain whether it is crooked or rather about to suffocate him.

Except for some outside guests like him and his father, the invited were all members of the college. No women. A moderately distinct chattering produced by tens of conversations combined into scraps of words, but they were primarily about politics, with some remarks about literature and sports news. He looked around the room for his father and discovered him near a crowd of deans. The rancour he felt before spread to his nerves. The walk on High Street to here had been a torture.

You’re the one I worry about, Robert.

He wanted to curse, summoned up courage and grabbed a glass of sherry from a waiter’s tray.

“I imagine that not even the child on the way will be baptized.”

“You know what we think about it, papa.”

“And the surname?”

“We haven’t yet talked about it.”

“But why not your own? Why has Jenny taken her mother’s family name?”

“Why not? Do you think it’s right that children are the exclusive property of the father, or do you worry about the family lineage? Sooner or later, Dick and Philip will fulfill your wish.”

“You’re the one I worry about, Robert.”

“Because I’m not equal to them.”

“That’s not true. Philip was a Fenian, and you know how mad he has made me because of his position in favour of the Boers.”

“But now he has his head in the right place. I am not Philip, papa.”

“The fact that you were in the front does not mean you can’t hope for a normal life and a respectable family. You’re twenty-five with a second child on the way. Isn’t it time to abandon youthful enthusiasms?”

“Advise me: Would you like me to abandon my political ideas first or my poetry?”

“Damn it, Robert!”

“How about suspending our hostilities? We’re here.”

He set down the empty glass and at that moment decided that anything could serve to distract him. He looked for a clue in the words that flowed across the great refectory, but he ran into comments of old Tories and the news on the last cricket game played by the college team. He retired to a corner occupied by a mismatched couple: a little fellow with a big head, and a stooped beanpole who, he seemed to remember, was the Regius Professor of Theology

“I always thought that Syrian-Greek philosophers have had a dominant influence on early Christianity. I think of the School of Gadara. In the Epistle of St. James there is an explicit reference to the Alexandrian poet Mnasalcus. . .”

“Perhaps you should deepen your intuition, Colonel Lawrence.”

Robert met the small fellow’s glance. His eyes, hidden under thick eyebrows, had something mesmerizing about them that captured the attention, the light blond hair reflected the lights from the lamps. He seemed very young. He wondered why the evening’s guest of honour did not take up the centre of the hall.

“I would be content with translating the anthology of Meleager. It is strange that no one has yet thought of doing it, right?”

“Because of too many vulgar epigrams, I think. Once purged of any reference to the immoral behaviors of the Greeks, very little would remain.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“In any case, if you decide to do the project, Colonel, don’t forget to consult with Professor Murray. He has original ideas about the task of the translator.”

Robert felt more awkward than ever, while the words came out on their own.

“Herald of dawn, hail, Morning Star; and may you return quickly as the Evening Star, secretly bringing her back again whom you take away.”[ix]

They looked at him vaguely stunned. Then Lawrence smiled.

“Meleager of Gadara.”

“Pardon me. I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation,” Robert said hiding his embarrassment. “The Star of Venus identified with Lucifer seems to link Meleager firmly with the Hebraic tradition.”

The professor elevated his nose.

“As a matter of fact, the Jews got rid of the cult of Venus once they were permanently located, and they did so in the clearest manner, associating her with Lucifer, or if you like Satan, in evening garments. The Christians gave her back a positive connotation.” He frowned as if in an effort to remember. “In the Second Letter of St. Peter the apostle defines the Parousia like a day in which the morning star will rise up in our hearts. Certainly the pagan and carnal love of the Hellenistic poets could not have anything to do with this.”

“I imagine not,” winked Lawrence. “It is the type of love that damns body and soul.” He turned to Robert. “You must be Graves, the poet. They told me you would be coming. I read a collection of your poems in Egypt in ’17, and I found them beautiful.”

“I’m flattered, Colonel.”

“No titles, please. Our uniforms are battling moths in the wardrobes.”

Someone came to the side of the professor of theology, to engage him in a discussion about the Trinity. Robert had the impression that it was a way to get close to the main guest of the evening, but Lawrence took advantage of this and wheeled his bust around enough to shut off the other conversation.

“You and I have at least two things in common. An Irish father and a Welsh birthplace. Your family lives in Harlech, right? I was born on the other side of the bay, in Tremadoc.”

“Really?”

“Well, actually my family moved quite a bit,” a gesture with his hand to change the subject. “In Cairo I knew your brother Philip. We worked side by side at the Arab Bureau. A brilliant person.”

“He’s a correspondent to *The Times* now. My other brothers have embarked on a diplomatic career abroad. I am the black sheep of my family.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, someone has to be such so that the good boys shine with their own light.”

Robert wondered if the skin-deep sympathy he felt was influenced by the person’s fame.

“If I understand correctly, classical poetry interests you.”

“Actually, modern poets attract me more. In London, I met Siegfried Sassoon, who, among other things, spoke about you. Here these poets are at home. Perhaps you could help me get to know some of them better.”

“If you wish. . .”

“That would be splendid. I’ve been out of England for too long and I need a guide.”

“I hope to be up to it.”

“Ah, on the contrary, Graves, I hope I am. The justification for my academic scholarship is clear: I must write my account of the war in Arabia. I need the best prose.”

“Do you think that the poets can be useful”?

“For what I have in my mind, yes, without a doubt. Once I asked Charles Doughty what he went searching for in Arabia, and he answered that he wanted to redeem the English language from the swamps where it languished since the time of Spenser.”

“A noble challenge.”

A ruddy-faced dean made his way to catch up with them.

“Ah, here is one who can give us an authoritative opinion. They were discussing the necessity for a naval blockade of Russia. You, Colonel, don’t believe that it is a vital need?”

“I would define it rather as a vocation, Professor Chambers.”

The man stroked his moustaches.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Russia, Ireland, the Middle East. Repressing revolutions is the national attitude at this moment. I ask what success we hope to gain.”

“As for Russia, we don’t have a choice,” insisted the professor. Or the Bolsheviks will spread as far as our shores.”

Lawrence slightly inclined his head thoughtfully.

“To exchange our level-headed Lloyd George with a charismatic leader like Lenin. God forbid, the country would not survive the shock.”

The other pretended to catch the spirit of the provocation.

“Don’t tell me you sympathize with Lenin, Colonel?”

“I content myself with envying him. He succeeded where I failed.”

The reply put out the professor’s smile.

“I beg to be excused,” said Lawrence. There was no need to add anything else, nor to make his way through the men in white tie and tails. He simply escaped, slipping out from the side, out of reach of any further question, like a servant who has completed his duties and takes leave of his masters.

Robert found himself following him without thinking. He even imagined they would directly leave the hall to move the conversation elsewhere, far away from the caryatids of All Souls. Instead, everyone's looks accompanied them to two armchairs.

“I think Chambers is upset,” said Lawrence. “I didn’t want to offend him. You, Graves, what do you think of socialism?”

“I’m a socialist.”

“Forgive my frankness, I should have thought so. Perhaps you also signed the Document of Oxford.”

“You don’t have to be a socialist to sign it, Mr. Lawrence. Common sense was enough.”

“I agree. Anti-German hatred is a propagandistic absurdity.”

“Many believe that the conditions for surrender imposed on Germany sooner or later will end up sparking another war.”

“They are totally right. In the coming years we will pay dearly for the mistakes made at the Peace Conference. And not only, however, with regards to Germany. Trust me, I was there. Perhaps we could have less gloomy topics to discuss. Maybe tomorrow at breakfast?”

“Most willingly.”

“We will finally talk about poetry. And, if it doesn’t disappoint you, my name has become awfully cumbersome; leave it alone.”

“No titles, no names. What can I call you?”

“Two letters are enough. To friends I am T. E.”

11. A Second Life

Jack finished putting the dishes back in the cupboard and moved to the drawing-room, buttoning up the sleeves of his shirt.

“Are you finished?” he asked the young girl sitting at the table.

She raised her eyes from the notebook.

“Almost.”

Jack peeked over her shoulder, absentmindedly. He had to find time also for his own work, the examinations were closer than he thought.

“Jack?”

“Yes?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“And when will you marry me?”

Jack pretended to tweak her ear.

“Stop it, Maureen. Finish your homework.”

“You’re only ten years older than I.”

The wicked tone of the young girl was artificial and pitiful.

“Your mother will get angry.”

“If we get married?”

He looked at her disapprovingly.

“If you don’t finish your homework.”

He cut short the conversation and sat on the armchair near the window. He kept looking at her for a few minutes. She was sitting composed, simpering, dandling just one leg, the point of her patent leather shoes grazing the floor. She was wearing overalls, by now very short, and Jack noticed that her body was not anymore that of a child. Of course, this was not a good reason for her to bluntly inform him that she had matured. This was the job of women, she should speak about it with her mother. Perhaps if they had been brothers it would have been less embarrassing.

He felt a heat wave rising from the bottom of his stomach up to his ears. He hurried to re-direct these thoughts to the hard domestic necessity: He noted that he would have to put aside the money to buy her new clothes, in her right size.

He started tidying up his notes, but his gaze immediately wandered to the fabric's weave, the fabric that covered the armrest. Cheap stuff already worn out. He closed his eyes, for just a moment, enough to gather ideas, enough to doze off.

A touch of a hand. Over him a placid smile, maternal.

Jack lifted his head from the backrest.

“I fell asleep.”

He searched the room with his eyes.

“She’s outside playing,” she assured him.

“I’ve done the shopping. It’s in the kitchen.”

Jack tried to stand up but she held him back.

“Why don’t you lie down on the bed?”

“Better not.” He delicately pushed her aside and forced a smile. “I would sleep until two in the afternoon tomorrow.”

At that moment he noticed the envelope in the woman's hands.

“News?” he asked hesitantly.

“Nothing new.” She looked away to hide her disappointment. “The Beast won’t give us a penny more.”

Jack blushed. He was embarrassed when she mentioned her husband in this way.

“Not even for Maureen?” he asked.

“This is his way of taking revenge.”

Jack clenched his fists.

“It’s terrible.”

“Yes.” She turned to stroke his face. “We’re too much of a burden on you.”

“No, I didn’t mean this. . .” he hurried to say. “For you, for your daughter.”

Janie Moore remained silent, and Jack watched her while searching for words to explain thoughts that troubled him. The thin mouth, the hair gathered at the nape of the neck, the smiling eyes that not even sadness could entirely wipe out. She was not beautiful, even if she did not look her age. She was keeping an obstinate dignity in face of the difficulty of life, which Jack ended up admiring.

“You’re so young,” she said, refusing to beat around the bush. “If you would like to leave us. . .”

He took her hands.

“Stop it.”

“We can’t demand this from you.”

“Don’t say anything.”

She again touched his cheek with the tip of her finger. She always managed to calm the anger that was boiling in his bosom. Her look reminded him of his mother’s before illness blurred it. At that time he was not able to save her, but life was giving him another possibility. To fill in the emptiness of Paddy’s death, to keep the promise.

She looked after him in the hospital, she welcomed him as the son who did not return. A lonely woman, who at forty found herself separated from her husband, with a child who was

growing up without a father or an older brother. Jack had become these two figures for her. His second life.

"I have to go," he said. He retrieved his jacket and notes. He kissed her on the cheek. "See you tomorrow."

She watched him leave from the window and turn into the street leading to the town centre.

When he passed through the college gate, he paused, undecided whether to climb the stairway quickly to his room. The bicycle ride had invigorated him and driven away his drowsiness, but he did not want to carry on any conversation. At least, not with Darsey. Yet he was sure he would find him there, ready to engage him in idle chatter. He could envision the topics that he would touch upon: the Christmas vacations, the exams, the new courses. . . He stopped in front of Shelley's Memorial in a quiet alcove. The statue of the poet's lifeless body, looked white on the slab of marble, as if laid in an invisible sea, supported by the Muse of Poetry and two bronze lions. He was barely thirty when he died, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while ploughing its waters in a small boat. Perhaps that was the end he sought, consistent with a romantic ideal, or rather a tribute demanded by the gods in exchange for a short life, lived defying every convention.

He observed the nude body of the young man, reclining on his side, white and smooth. He seemed ready to be awakened with a kiss. The soft fold running between his shoulders and his hips, the small genitals, barely outlined, the lips half-open. There was something lascivious in the shapes that the sculptor had wanted to impress upon marble, a latent desire. Jack repressed the impulse to touch that tapered, white hand. He shuddered and looked up at the cupola. A blue sky frescoed the vault, a pale imitation of the blue under which the corpse had been lulled by the waves, all the way to an Italian beach.

Jack thought of how much hypocrisy was behind erecting the monument to the most famous student of the college, expelled for having written a pamphlet in support of atheism. The umpteenth martyr of Reason, to whom were due crocodile tears and a posthumous glory.

For a moment the words of his old tutor resonated under the vault.

Faith is belief not knowledge, Jack. We have no definite proof of any religion, and if we consider it from a philosophical point of view, Christianity is not even the best one. Religions are mythologies, simple inventions of man.

This thick-skinned Scot had helped him reaffirm his opinion, honouring him with methodical and meticulous discussions, which often led to an incontrovertible conclusion.

Do you understand now how your observation was entirely meaningless?

Jack smiled to himself, recalling those exercises of sobriety and rationalization. Years that were used to build a solid armour for his ideas and to discover something that he basically already knew: his destiny was literature. Not anymore the childhood fantasies in the attic, but the close study of the classics.

You cannot dedicate yourself to anything else, boy. Resign yourself.

That was the last sentence of old Kirkpatrick. It turned into a one-way ticket to Oxford, towards an expected academic career. That did not stop him from secretly nourishing a vain poetic ambition, writing mediocre and awkward lines according to critics. Another hard dose of reality, which had left a taste of bitterness in his mouth. Clive Staples Lewis, nicknamed Jack, who had survived the fogs of Ireland and the war, would not become a poet, but at best only the umpteenth scholar dedicated to literature written by others.

He started to walk and found himself in front of a staircase that led up to the rooms; he stared at it as an inescapable destiny. He began to climb up the steps slowly, without any hurry to get to his room, where he knew company lay in wait for him.

12. Merlin's Cave

In the beginning was the *wara*, in the depths of the Germanic forest. Then the *varar* of the Scandinavian fjords. Truth, oath, faith. Betrayed by the Devil, the first of the perjurers. To his pointy tail was soon attached the verb *leogan*, "to lie," because the demon is also the first traitor and liar. When his deformed and cannibal servant, the *waerloga*, landed on the islands, the Scotsman took out the final vowel to harden his name and curse him. So, from the fogs of the Highlands emerged the *warlock*, the sorcerer, who now stood in front of him, in the hall of the rings.

"You must be Tolkien."

Clairvoyance is an enchanter's gift, thought Ronald.

"Don't be surprised. As the Director of the Museum nothing happening around here escapes me."

Professor Hogarth introduced himself and Ronald clasped his hand without looking into his eyes. He concentrated on the grey goatee sculpted on his chin.

"For example, I know that you like to stop here when there is no one around."

Ronald thought that the custodian must have revealed his secret.

"I. . ."

"Don't blame Harris, I beg you. He is a discreet person."

Perhaps he was really reading his mind.

"It was Lawrence who spoke to me about you," continued Hogarth. "I think he was very impressed by your chats in front of this case."

“I must have seemed really naïve to him,” said Ronald. “Unfortunately, I discovered who he is only after the meeting. I’m not up to date on the news.”

“Of course, you prefer the past, like me.” A smile under his moustaches. “May I keep you company?” He pointed to the room next door. “Come, I also like to wander among the relics when the Museum is empty.”

While they were walking side by side, Ronald thought it was as if he was waiting for him, as if the whole Museum had been set up for them. Yet beneath the surface of his courtesy, Hogarth could hide nothing other than a reward for his assiduous attendance after hours. Ronald had returned here, hoping to meet Lawrence again, to speak to him more. For some hidden reasons he had realised that he was nostalgic for those brief moments of sincerity in front of the rings. The spectral apparition a few nights before had left him even more alone than the losses of the war. He wished he could get over modesty and try to speak of it to someone, maybe in the intimacy of an empty museum, even though now he knew that Lawrence was definitely not an ordinary person. He realised now how strange and puerile this idea was and wiped it out of his mind, while he let himself be led towards the hall of the Anglo-Saxon Period.

Crockery, brooches and hilts cleaned up of rust, the blades lost in battle that had decided the power in the island and now lie who knows where, between the ribs of skeletons, under layers of earth and musk.

Hogarth pointed to one of the showcases.

“You know, a few of these objects were retrieved by Lawrence. When he was a student he searched the countryside on behalf of the Museum. After all, we archeologists have the same job as you, Mr. Tolkien. We extract hypotheses and histories out of the splinters of time. From one syllable you can trace a word, a concept, and construct the meaning of one lost poem. From one capital of a column we reconstruct a period, a city. Have you ever wondered what drives people like you and me to turn towards the past?”

“I imagine it is the sense of perfection,” responded Ronald. “The fact that it cannot disappoint us.”

Hogarth nodded, looking upwards as if to read the answer on the ceiling.

“Not just that. Think of what drove Winckelmann and Schliemann and still guides our Petrie and Evans.” The voice of the sorcerer was a trickle of tepid water. “It is the ambition to discover the battlegrounds of poetry, myths, religion. We search for Achilles, Odysseus, Moses. We want to see the face of the Gorgon reflected in the shield of Perseus and seize the Minotaur by the horns. My friend Woolley wants to find the city of Ur, where Abraham was born. What do you look for in this room, Mr. Tolkien? Perhaps Beowulf, or Sigurd. Names change, but it is the same story that repeats itself from the dawn of time. A powerful, wise king, sitting in his palace, threatened by an obscure menace. A stranger reaches out from across the sea to offer the necessary services, and this hero will carry out his mission. The King is Minos, or maybe Hrothgar, or Arthur on the throne in Camelot. The champion to put his life at risk to free the earth from the curse is Theseus, Galahad . . . or why not? Lawrence.”

They walked on. The professor crossed his arms behind his back.

“Whether we like it or not, we walk looking back. An archeologist transforms myths into historical reality. A philologist can reconstruct the poetic grandeur of the ancients. Whoever reconstructs lost worlds can imagine new ones. It is up to us to decide how to use the small creative force which is handed to us, and this is what Lawrence did.”

“I suppose you’re very proud of him.”

Hogarth smiled with pleasure.

“I only gave a shy, stubborn, young man a small push out of here, toward the border that separate what we are from what we could become. But he chose his own destiny.”

They moved slowly into the next room, with Hogarth continuously talking in the same enchanting tone.

“An Arab proverb says that he who lives sees many things, but he who travels sees more. Lawrence’s first journey was through France, up to the Mediterranean. A sea means another bank with new people and uncharted territory, heavenly cities to be snatched from the sand of millennia. First Lawrence did this alone, with my blessings, then together with Woolley, in the Syrian Desert. Until our fate has been projected onto a wider scene and turned us into pawns of the Great Game. We all had to do our part.”

They were going through the room of portraits. On the walls people from the sixteenth century choked by stiff white collars were observing them, ladies with small pets and daring hairstyles, a series of exotic looking noblemen. A Turk with his turban and pointed beard. A young Arab prince, draped with a rich robe. The black, laughing eyes seemed to mock the austere appearance of everyone else.

Ronald found himself at the exit without realizing it, unaware of the time. The sun was already below the line of windows, and a shaft of golden light crossed the atrium of the Museum.

“Perhaps you’re wondering why I told you all this. Let’s say it’s my way of repaying you. You have accidentally helped me convince Lawrence that he can complete his work even with a pen in hand. To write a chronicle of war will be his most challenging task.”

Ronald hesitated for a moment.

“This was most interesting.”

The professor squeezed his hand.

“Come and visit me whenever you like.”

Before descending the flight of steps, Ronald turned to look at the main gate of the temple which was closed with a strong thud, a seal of its precious treasure.

He reached the street and took the way home, mulling over the words he just heard. In such a brilliant and clear exposition, there was something unconvincing. Probably the fact that that night, when he met him in the hall of rings, Lawrence appeared like a little, nonthreatening

man, full of doubts, in whom he even found the courage to confide. It was hard to imagine him as a new Achilles, whom everyone was talking about. It was even unfair.

He found himself at the corner of Alfred Street and noticed that he did not want to go home. He knew well why. Since the time he had hallucinations, strange shivers would run over him each time he sat in the study. He could not accept this, it was a macabre mind game that he could not put away in a box. And nobody with whom to talk about it. Instinctively, he walked up until the pub's sign: an eagle clutching in his beak a sheet with a swaddled baby in it. Ganymede kidnapped by Zeus.

The place was not yet crowded, he chose a small table in a corner where he sat and sipped a beer. On the opposite wall hung the photograph of a company of infantry, with their names written in pencil next to each one. Ronald wondered how many of them returned home.

He closed his eyes and saw again the narrow path leading towards the first line. He heard his panting under the weight of the backpack, his shoulders aching and his stomach up in his throat. On the day of his baptism by fire he could not eat anything. Like at the last supper in Bouzincourt, in the rear, together with Geoffrey, waiting for the respective companies to be sent to attack. The Somme offensive had been raging for days and was proving a useless massacre. Crouched on their mattresses, they saw the wounded multiplying into hundreds on stretchers, without arms or legs. Blood mixed with mud and sewage along the grooves of the trenches. Everywhere there was the odour of gangrene and decomposition. Above them, the muffled thunder of cannons, day and night.

He saw again the face of Geoffrey illuminated by a lantern.

"Do you think Rob was afraid? That he realised it?"

"I know that at Boisselle it was terrible. The first wave. . . "

They never felt so sad.

"My God. If it must happen to me, I hope it would be quick. Any news from Chris?"

"He wrote to me. He heard about Rob. I told him that for me the TCBS is over."

He opened his eyes, stood up and left his beer mug on the table. The fresh air of the night helped him drive away these rough memories and enter his home as if nothing happened. He hesitated on the threshold of the study, then cursed in silence and reached the desk. He opened a drawer. At the bottom there was a bunch of yellowed envelopes. He looked at them without touching them. On some was written in pen a heading now discolored: "TCBS", Tea Club and Barrovian Society. A bombastic acronym to designate four boys who dreamed of literary glory.

The voice of Edith from the kitchen announced that dinner way ready.

He closed the drawer.

Lord Dyamite

Carchemish, North of Syria, September 1913

The cool tea darkens the glass. The smooth surface touches the cheek, the eyes close halfway in an expression of beatitude, while the freshness moistens the moustaches. The man peers at the comings and goings of the workers. They are moving slowly, randomly, crushing their shadows with their feet, as far as the sleepers. The wind suddenly stopped, leaving them locked in a hot air bubble that dulls the senses.

The other man seated under the tent finishes drinking and dries his balding head with a handkerchief. He, too, has moustaches, even more impressive, sprouting at the sides of the mouth like handlebars. The chair seems to sag under his massive bulk that makes it creak.

“We should have brought a team of German workers. I have said this to Meissner, but he didn’t care.”

“It will take only a little more time.”

“More time than necessary and more effort. These men don’t know discipline, they understand only the whip. I wonder how they expect us to build the railway with men with so little motivation.” The man points with his chin towards the building site. “Look at them. We are truly in the Middle Ages here, for them it’s not important to develop their own country.”

The other pours more tea in their glasses.

“They are Syrians and Kurds. The railway is Turkish, built by German engineers. They work for money, not for glory.”

His partner extends his legs and with a fly swatter beats his leather boots.

“You’re naïve, Contzen. If it were not for us, they would ride away again on these mangy camels. Yet, it almost seems they are annoyed with what we do.”

Contzen picks up his binoculars and points them at random at the parched clearing.

“A little ingratitude is an acceptable price to pay for beating the competition.”

“Competition? The French, the Russians and the English want only to take each a piece of the Ottoman Empire. We work to keep it standing. Indeed, on the railroad tracks.”

The bald man sneers, amused at his own irony, as the binoculars of Cotzen slowly glides over the horizon.

“Now it’s you who’s naïve, Grindel.”

The other does not respond, finishes drinking his tea and inserts a cigarette in his black cigarette holder. He lights it and puffs out the smoke, turning his head backwards.

The binoculars stop.

“If it is of some solace, even the British are slowing down.”

“Because they pass the time spying on us.”

Cotzen lowers down the binoculars.

“They are archeologists. They gather clay bits and statues. That Woolley is an easygoing fellow.”

“He thinks he’s the master acting as a host. Typical of the British. What can you tell me about his assistant? He seems to always hang around here, speaking to our workers. I think he’s collecting information on our business.”

“Many of them work also at the excavation sites. No one here does only one thing. Not even we.” Contzen picks up his glass and takes long sips, then places it again on the table, peering at Grindel sideways. “From Berlin they ask us to do some deeper digging. Perhaps if they use the word *drilling*, the Turks could take it badly. And if we discover petrol, what shall we do?”

Grindel stops smoking.

“And if the British discover it? Maybe when they are looking for statues?”

Contzen lifts up the binoculars again so as not meet the eyes of the other.

“Whatever happens, we all know what awaits us. It’s only a matter of time.”

There is a bitter tone in his voice. Grindel seems pleased at having swept away the sarcasm of his partner and tries to do the same with the flies that buzz in the tent.

Contzen's lenses frame a movement at the edge of the clearing. A group of men walks behind an approaching figure.

The fingers put in focus a small, tanned, short man.

"What is the name of Woolley's assistant?"

The other touched his forehead with a thick finger.

"Lorenz, I think. Something like that . . . a busybody."

"A bold busybody. He's crossing the clearing at high noon, and he looks like he's coming this way."

Grindel sits up in the chair which produces a sinister squeak.

"What the devil does he want?"

Contzen does not answer. He stands up under the tent to receive the Englishman. He watches the small figure approaching: He is wearing an Arab headdress for sun protection. The workers stop and let him proceed alone. He plants himself a step away from the shadow line, as if he had reached a pre-established and impassable point.

"Greetings."

"Good morning."

"A nice walk. Can we offer you some cold tea?"

"No, thank you."

The young man looked icily at the shoulders of Contzen.

"This morning your engineer attacked my assistant."

The amazed look of Contzen does not produce the least effect on the Englishman's face.

"Herr Grindel didn't attack anyone, I guarantee that. He whipped a worker because he wasn't respectful."

"And you don't define this as aggression?"

"Certainly not," intervenes Grindel. He comes forward swaying on his legs. "It's ordinary administration. It's not possible to avail ourselves of natives without whipping them. Here, it happens to us every day. There's no other way."

Silence. The small one fixes his eyes on the giant's face, who stands above him at least one foot.

Contzen observes the scene, dumbfounded. The workers are close together in a semicircle behind the Englishman, remaining at a distance, but looking at Grindel, who could knock the Englishman down with one hand.

The young man keeps his hands along his sides and talks in a firm voice.

“We’ve been here longer than you and we’ve never whipped even one of our workers. We won’t permit you to start doing so.”

Grindel, red-faced, assumes an air of forced amusement and seems to be about to burst out laughing, but the laughter breaks up at the wall of dark faces, hardened by heat and fatigue. He becomes serious.

“You English always think you’re the rulers.”

“You don’t understand. You have humiliated one of the villagers. In these parts, it isn’t something that they forget. You must immediately apologize.”

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“Not at all. Otherwise I’ll be forced to whip you to give these people satisfaction.”

Grindel clenches his jaw, forearms pumped up, hands close to his belt. He is about to respond, but Contzen hurries to drag him away to the tent.

“We don’t need a diplomatic incident, Grindel.”

“How dare he come here to threaten me?” The face of Grindel is red as wine. “He’s lucky if I don’t send him back with a kick.”

“Stay calm and listen to me. The work has to continue, the workers need us. Give your apologies and end it here.”

The other, pale-faced, looks at him,

“Are you serious?”

“Don’t be foolish. Do you want to make it a State affair? I am the supervisor of the workers. It’s up to me to decide what’s right. Do as I say and let’s not talk about it anymore.”

Grindel stares at him for a long time. Then he puffed in annoyance.

“To hell.”

He advances again. The Englishman has not moved one step.

“I apologize to you.”

The little man shakes his head.

“Not to me.”

At a gesture from his hand out emerges from the group a brown, beardless boy.

The German gives out a half-resigned grunt.

“I apologize.” He moves out of the shadow, into the middle of the Arabs, and plants his big legs as if he would challenge them aloud. “I apologize to him and all of you. Are you satisfied?”

The Englishman bows slightly in a gesture of leave-taking and turns on his heels. The workers follow him, some still glaring at the moustached giant, who is facing them daringly, until the last one also turns around to go back.

Careful that his partner would not notice it, Contzen breaks into half a smile as he watches that strange character mingling with the others.

The breath of the river enters the window of the barrack in brief gusts. *Fererehat*, the Kurds of the camp call it. Wide flowing water. Father Euphrates.

The flowing current along the banks could tell the history of humanity. The man looks out and thinks that it all began here, and there is no other place where he would like to be, among the ruins of time, to snatch the treasure of the ancient sovereigns of Mesopotamia from the earth. A king among kings.

He deeply inhales the freshness of the night, pervaded by the slurred songs of the workers around the fires. He claims to recognize one by one of the dark shapes who descend to the river and return to sleep under the tents, awaiting another day of heat and fatigue.

A rustling of pages pushes him towards the inside of the barrack, permeated with the odours of spices that flavoured the dinner. By the light of the lamp, the face of Woolley is tense under the stress of writing, his hair disheveled at his forehead. This man taught him much. To remain stooped for hours, sweeping the sand from a shard, equipped only with a small brush. To discover where to excavate, matching history with common sense and instinct. Selecting men on the basis of merit. Paying them well so they would not be tempted to traffic in relics and sell them in the black market. Above all, to pursue knowledge and not to get tired of doing it.

Woolley notices that someone is looking at him.

“Shipping papers.” Almost an apologetic tone. “They may be the last.”

The younger man seems dumbfounded.

“At the end of the year we leave,” adds Woolley.

“Is it because of what happened today?”

With his hand Woolley drives away the images just evoked.

“Oh, no, that windbag had to be put in his place.” He indicates one letter on the camp table. “New provisions from home.”

“Hogarth?”

Woolley nods.

“It seems that the maps of Sinai need to be updated.”

The news forces the young man to sit on the camp bed.

“So it’s about to start?”

“Yes. Hogarth is convinced that in one year we’ll be at war.”

“Sinai” . . . repeats the young man to himself. “The Turks will suspect.”

“Let them suspect. The ambassador obtained permissions. It will look like an archeological expedition on the trail of Moses.” A deep sigh. “I hope we’ll have time to return here for the last packing and boarding up of the digging site.”

They remain silent for a long time, thinking about what lies ahead.

“What will we do when the storm breaks out?” asks Lawrence.

Woolley folds the papers.

“We do our part. As we have done up till now.”

Time to lie down, and the lamp is put out with a blow. Darkness takes over the space between the two men, leaving them at the mercy of thoughts.

El Urens

Winter 1920

13. Renascence

The train slows down to a halt with a clanging of helmets and mess kits. The last jolt draws curses from the soldiers.

"*Wake up!"*

The door is thrown open on the platform and the men jump down, clumsy under the weight of their backpacks, hands protecting eyes from the reflection of the white sky. In front of them on the wall of the station, scrawled in faded letters, is the word "Béthune."

"Wake up!"

Pushed by the sergeants' shouts, they form a sleepy line along the muddy street that skirts a group of small houses, similar to mushrooms that sprouted after the rain. The order for singing is given and the dirge starts, while a gang of skinny boys come out from a hideout and run along the marching columns.

"Tommee, donnez-moi viande en boîte! Donnez-moi viande en boîte, s'il vous plait, Tommee!

"Wake up, Robert!"

The elbow roused him. He took a few seconds to regain consciousness, while the regiment's song flowed into the voice of the professor of literature. He was talking about Coleridge.

"You were dreaming with your eyes open, again" whispered Edmund.

Robert thanked him with a touch on his shoulder. It often happened to him that he was enraptured by images and memories, the sensations were so vivid as to involve the senses. He smelled again the stink of cow carcasses, outside the village of Béthune.

He tried to focus on the lecture, but the subject did not help. He almost repented of having dropped the course on Classic Literature for that on English Literature. These professors knelt in worship at the graveyards of the eighteenth-century poets. Even the instructor of Anglo-Saxon would read *Beowulf* recommending not to waste time looking for some literary value in it. The rude Vikings who had sung the story of their ancient hero could not have anything to say to the contemporaries. Literature could flourish only in the languid Lake District, certainly not in icy Denmark. Not to mention "modernism": a word to murmur in the corridors, careful that no professor was nearby.

That sea of academic conformism swelled in the storm of trimester reports to the Council of the Institute, where old black-robed gargoyles stood in judgment over the students' essays. It took little time for them to overcome the intimidation vis-a-vis the young saviours of the country and to regain the prewar complacency, without caring about those who had shed blood to allow them to rule again. The most common reproach was to have a literary taste. To prefer meant to select, and selecting could induce the temptation to excel: a heresy hardly less serious than sodomy and cohabiting in *more uxorio.*

Yet it was as if they were now meeting some passive resistance. Those veterans who had abandoned their uniforms for the black robes, started doing something new: They looked at each other and recognized each other. The words would soon follow. The facts, perhaps. Some signs were already noticeable, voices, phrases in the Common Rooms and courtyards. All in all, a new year had begun, rather a decade. The year 1920 treasured the expectations of many.

When the professor finished speaking and dismissed the class, Robert stood up in a hurry attracting everyone's attention. He signaled to Ed.

"Let's go. It's eleven, he should be awake."

"He takes it easy."

"He writes at night."

Lawrence touched the clay statuette on the shelf. It represented a Hittite horseman, he said. A memory of his digging sites at Carchemish, before the war. He had pulled it out of a child's tomb, dead for four-thousand years.

"It makes you sad, eh? The objects that we select to carry with us tell our story. They are nothing but things, yet we give them an immeasurable value. To the point of burying a son with his toy."

Robert's heart sank. He was certain that Lawrence did not know about the tragedy that had upset Edmund's life. He looked at his friend with fear, and he discovered that he was sympathetic to those words, as if they were meant for him.

Lawrence let his fingers run over the spines of the books, supported by a brass bell.

"The books, for example. If you want to know something about a man, find out what he reads."

As soon as he crossed the doorstep, Robert realised that Ed's gaze gave way to the temptation to scour the surfaces in search of the envelope.

"We have a tacit agreement: We do not talk about the war. Therefore no mention of the book that he is writing."

"What shall we talk about?"

"Poetry. The techniques of writing."

Edmund had identified the manuscript on the desk, but to divert attention, he immediately asked for the ancient-looking statuette that stood out on the shelf.

"And what does the bell represent?"

Lawrence smiled warmly.

"War booty. It is the bell of the Tell Shahum Station on the Hejaz railroad. One minute late and I would have had to be content with the punching machine or with the wood stamp from the railway office. The Bedouins are like locusts."

He had offered them the only two chairs in the room, while he remained standing on the base of the fireplace. Perhaps to appear taller, Robert thought. On the big table a dish with leftovers of a frugal breakfast. Panels of dark wood on the walls maintained the dim light all

around. The light entered from the small window, which barely managed to frame a piece of sky and courtyard. It was like being in an alcove, or in a room in an oriental castle. There was a pleasing odour of wood and spices in the air, sweet perfume of exotic textiles. Robert imagined that it came from the carpets under their feet.

Their gaze lifted to the portrait of the Arab with kind features who looked down on them from above the fireplace.

Lawrence mimicked a reverence in the direction of the painting.

"His Highness Prince Feisal. A friend of mine."

Robert noticed the small, crimson flag hung vertically near the painting.

"His blazon of battle," commented Lawrence.

There was a knock at the door and the attendant entered with a pair of beer mugs.

"You don't drink?" asked Robert.

"I'm a non-drinker."

A little later, during the next lecture, Robert would not know how the conversation went. He was just getting familiar with Lawrence's ways. The latter was cordial, nice, and at the same time elusive. He indirectly interrogated them with questions disguised as statements, like stones thrown in the pond, every one getting farther from the edges, until they reached the centre, the heart of the matter. But only to withdraw suddenly, hiding his hand, using it in a distracting action, like a magician who must take the mind of the audience away from the trick. It seemed that the speeches proceeded freely, going back and forth, but in the end there was the feeling that a subtle direction had led the discussion.

They ended up talking about the dead poets: Owen, Brooke, Rosenberg. And about the living ones: Sassoon and Nichols in particular. A renascence, Lawrence defined it, and only after the word was said, did Robert notice that Lawrence was referring to one of his old poems. Lawrence recited:

On Achi Baba's rock their bones

Whiten, and on Flanders' plain,

But of their travailings and groans

Poetry is born again. ("A Renascence" lines 13-16)[x]

"These verses came out from the bottom of a trench, in '16," said Robert. "Now I don't subscribe at all to such rhetoric."

"Nonetheless, I think they hit the nail on the head," insisted Lawrence. "Poetry looks into enigmas and feeds on paradoxes."

"All the poetry in the world is not worth the life of a man," commented Ed bitterly.

Robert felt that he exaggerated, nobody was judging him or his poetry. Lawrence invited Ed to speak about what he was writing. They moved far away from the war, leaving words to flow along with time.

When they took their leave, Lawrence invited them to return the following day.

They spent the rest of the morning listening to a lecture on Wordsworth. That afternoon the climb up to Boar's Hill was slow and tiring. Edmund was short of breath, but it was for that clean air that he got the permission to live out of college, and so he gasped for breath without complaining. All Robert needed was the diagnosis of acute neurasthenia. They said their goodbyes near the residence of Edmund high on top. Robert proceeded to Masefield Manor, as they took to calling it, and to the small cottage. From the doorstep he noticed the silence. On the table in the living room there was a note near an envelope.

"We have gone painting. There's a letter for you. N. & J."

He checked the sender. He had been waiting for that response for quite a while. He sat by the lamp and turned the letter over in his hands.

Jenny's laughter reached him from the courtyard. The door opened and his daughter ran to meet him, his arms outstretched to the sky. On the doorstep Nancy puffed holding her belly, while Margaret set down the tripod and box of paints.

"Welcome back, sir," said the nanny.

Nancy reached a chair.

"What does Philip write to you?"

"The usual lecture, I imagine."

Robert let the child pull his hair and played with her until Nancy called Margaret to take care of her. Jenny pouted and let herself be led away. Left alone, Nancy sat on her husband's lap, took his hand and placed it on her belly.

"Today he's nervous. He kicks like a colt."

"Are you sure it's a male?"

"I feel it is."

He stroked the impish tuft of hair over her eyes, with his finger sliding over her delicate profile, the turned-up nose, the mouth, the round chin. He did not tell her about that morning. He did not talk about the visit to Lawrence, nor about the previous ones. She would not appreciate the indulgence toward the most eccentric of survivors. He kissed her.

"What about David?"

"David," she repeated savouring the sound of each letter. "Yes. I like it."

Lord Dynamite

Cairo, November 1915

The hall of The Savoy is all in khaki color. The muffled buzz that spreads around suggests relaxation as of an upper-class reception rather than of one in the middle of a world conflict. The only exotic details are the ashtrays in the form of scarabs and the Egyptian bellboys who flash between screens.

“Sixty-five,” declares one of the two men seated on the corner small sofa. “If the Turks want to win the war it would be enough to place a bomb in here.”

“Sixty-four. That brigadier general there at the end moved and you counted him twice.”

“I know General Middlemandlemountmouth personally. I could never confuse myself.”

They sneer, continuing to peep through the hole of the screen from where they counted.

“They sent here the one who turned himself in in Ismailia. Clayton wants us to interrogate him at once.”

They mumble in agreement.

“We’ll miss the conference.”

“And since when have we been invited?”

The blond sighs.

“It speaks volumes about how things are going around here.”

The other picks up their hats from the table.

“I thought you loved Cairo.”

The blond grimaces, while he pushes down his beret on his head.

“Just on odd days.”

“What is your name?”

The question breaks the short silence.

The Arab looks up from his feet, first at one and then at the other Englishman, not sure who has spoken. He looks away from the one leaning against the window, who stares at him coldly, with a cigarette between his lips. The man at the desk looks very young, his hair golden, parted in the middle and longer than that of other military men, his uniform crumpled. He decides to respond to him.

“Tariq al-Fahd.”

“How did you come to Ismailia?”

His voice is gentle, but his eyes never leave the briefcase on his knees.

“On foot up to the Canal. Then I found a lift on the barge.”

“Where did you learn English?”

The Arab hesitates, the question is put forward in his language.

“When I was a boy I worked in Alexandria, effendi. Three years.”

“Where are you from?”

The language of the Koran again.

“From Ma’an.”

“Then why do you have a Northern accent?”

The blond returns to his native tongue. The Arab remains quiet, a stolid expression on his face; then he shoos a fly that settles on his arm, drawn by the sweat.

“Please forgive me, effendi. I am from the Aleppo region. I worked for the Turks in Ma’an.”

The two Englishmen exchange a hardly perceptible nod.

“Why did you lie?”

The Arab looks at his hands, not knowing what to with them, and then lets them fall in his lap.

“I’m afraid, effendi.”

“Should I believe you?”

“As God is my witness, effendi.”

The tone is sad, imploring.

The two Englishmen remain silent and the Arab takes advantage and let his eyes wander. The flies are circling around the chandelier. Beyond the window panes, the buildings of the square soar above the roofs of the European Quarter. A map of the Middle East is hanging on the wall in dull colours of military cartography. In the corner, a cabinet is closed with a lock. On the other wall, a calendar and a portrait of George V in full uniform.

“What kind of work did you do for the Turks?”

“I was among the workers on the railway. I listened to their conversations and reported on them.”

The blond Englishman scribbles something in the folder. From the window flows in the noise of a lorry that clatters along the street, shaking the glass. The Englishman seems distracted, looks out, drums with his fingers, then turns to the papers.

“Did you work only in Ma’an or in other parts as well?”

“On the whole line from Damascus.”

The blond continues to look elsewhere.

“Why did you escape? Didn’t the Turks pay you enough?”

“I didn’t want to do this anymore. The others started to suspect me. I was afraid.”

The other Englishman also goes and sits at the desk, but he remains quiet.

“Given the work that you did, you have to have the ability to observe and a good memory,” proceeds the blond.

“Thanks to God, the Kind and Merciful.”

“What divisions are stationed in Damascus?”

The Arab grimaces as he tries to remember.

“The 25th, the 35th, and the 36th.”

“When you gave yourself up, you said that you could tell us a lot about the railway.”

The Arab searches for help in the faces of the two men, but the wall of indifference is smooth without any crack. He has a dry throat and the flies torment him.

“Governor Jemal ordered the gathering of all materials that could be found. He emptied the railroad warehouses from Damascus to Medina.”

“What kind of material?”

“Railway tracks, sleepers, bolts. Everything that is needed to finish the track from Jerusalem to Beersheba. With a narrow-gauge route up to El-Arish.”

The Englishman remains impassive.

“Who directs these jobs?”

The Arab straightens up in his chair, he feels like he’s slipping. He coughs.

“A German engineer, effendi.”

“Meissner?”

“Meissner Pasha, yes.”

He closes the folder. Finally the blond looks at him. He has small, light-coloured eyes.

“Good. A couple of questions more.” He plays with the pen. “You said that you come from Aleppo?”

“A small town nearby, effendi. It is called Jerablus.”

The Englishman nods.

“So you know Salim Tumah.”

The Arab tries to hide his surprise.

“Who doesn’t know him? He is the richest in the region. Everyone works for him.”

“Even you?”

“Yes. Before I moved here.”

“Of course.” The Englishman nods again. “At the entrance of Salim Tumah’s house there’s an ivory statue. Do you remember the ivory statue?”

The Arab scratches his beard.

“Yes. An ivory elephant.”

“Do you remember it well?”

“Absolutely.”

“How tall is the statue?”

The Arab thinks about it.

“On the pedestal it is as tall as a man.”

The Englishman puts down the pen and closes the folder again.

“Very good. Wait outside.”

The other Englishman accompanies the Arab and makes him sit in the corridor. When he re-enters and closes the door behind him, he notices that the blond took something from the cabinet. In the warm light of the afternoon he seems like a young boy. He refuses the cigarette offered to him and lets his colleague peek at the folder on the desk. There were only scribbles and doodles on the papers. He hears him grin.

“You’re having fun, eh?”

“Just on even days.”

The blond sits down again.

“Our friend tries to get some money from us and engage us. The statue in Salim Tumah’s house is not ivory, but gold, and doesn’t have a pedestal. Salim is very proud of it, before receiving the guests he makes them stop in the courtyard in order to admire it. Our Tariq never set foot in his house. And probably in Aleppo they know him well. This is why he tried to cover up his origin by saying he is from Jerablus. He practiced the part in case someone had asked him questions.”

“The information is correct,” objects the colleague. “Jemal is preparing an offensive in Sinai. Or were you trying to get something else out of him?”

The blond flattens the photograph he took from the cabinet on the table. The frame is crooked, the shapes blurred.

“It was taken three weeks ago near Damascus. It is one of the direct trains to Beersheba which our Tariq speaks about, or whatever his real name is.”

Large shapes covered with waxed sheets, above a railway carriage. In a couple of places black crosses stamped on the sides of the fixtures can be seen.

“They could be reconnaissance Rumplers.[xi] It is difficult to make out,” says the other with the cigarette in his mouth. “It would mean that the Turks built an airport in south Palestine.” His eyes meet those of the blond. “Is this the confirmation that you were looking for? What does Clayton say?”

“He’s busy with the conference of leaders. The one that we’re not invited to.”

The colleague shakes his head and continues to look at the photograph.

“It’s too blurry.” He stops, as if distracted by a thought. “Who has taken it?”

A friendly smile.

“Is it important?”

“Do you ever wonder how many agents we have over the lines, Lawrence?”

The blond shrugs.

“And how many of them do the Turks have?”

He puts out the cigarette in the ashtray with a nervous gesture.

“It’s better to go and bother Clayton.”

Someone knocks at the door.

“Come in.”

Professor Hogarth appears on the doorstep, his face pale, drawn. He grips a small, envelope of rough paper, porous, with the army crest on it. There is no British subject who does not know what it contains.

“They brought it a moment ago.”

The blond takes the letter and turns to his colleague.

“I’ll catch up with you,” he murmurs.

The other cannot look at him, he just nods and takes his leave.

The blond reads the telegram. The formal sentences from the Minister of War are like bullets. Remote words reach him, the voice of his father, which orders them to stay still, otherwise he cannot take the picture. There is a house, a garden, in Arcadia, where everything is still intact and five brothers are trying to stay still without laughing.

“I’m sorry, my boy,” murmurs Hogarth.

He does not turn, if he moves the photograph is ruined.

The minutes pass slowly, before he manages to speak.

“They were both younger than I. Does it seem fair to you that I can continue to live safe here in Cairo?” For a moment his voice falters but immediately regains balance. “Let me go away, Professor. Where the fight is.”

The man comes near and manages to place a hand on his shoulder.

14. Philip

My dear Robert,

If I didn't know you I should be amazed that in your first letter in a long time to these parts you ask me about someone else. Especially now that the object of your interest has returned to Oxford and is much more within your reach than my memories can be. Nevertheless, I know how much Lawrence manages to arouse the curiosity of others (and also how much he likes it), and this pushes me to a certain indulgence with you. In short, you're excused, certain that as usual I will end up disappointing you, and not because of bad will or reticence, but because I have no real answer to your question.

I lived with Lawrence in a rather intense time, afterwards the war changed many things and, as you well know, changed us. Now everything appears very different, five years past seem twenty.

You ask me about Lawrence in Cairo and at the Arab Bureau. I remember an obstinate, impertinent person who loved to act mysterious to give the impression that he had access to higher plans of decisions and events. It could be irritating, but I was amused. Sometimes I think his was a game of Chinese boxes and the smallest one contained only a grand critical spirit and much fantasy. In spite of this, I believe that his commitment was sincere. He did not waver even when he knew that his two brothers were killed in France. The matter disturbed him, obviously, but he never talked about it openly. He didn't like to discuss private matters, at least with me he never did.

Cairo was too small for him. He said that it was overcrowded, too many uniforms and too many gold stars. The quiet of the government's quarters was suffocating him. He preferred to go into the markets, among the alleys, where occasionally he disappeared without telling us when he would return. The city is a whirlpool of voices and noises. After the first months, one doesn't notice the absence of silence. The streets are never empty, even at night, there's always someone or something determined to interrupt sleep and steal rest as if they were luxuries and odd habits that only a European would enjoy. We smiled at the conversations at restaurant tables, in tea houses, in building corridors, and on the terraces overlooking the river. They spoke of the laziness of Orientals, ignoring how that land is rather the land of incessant activity, of endless and chaotic swarming, of a fierce vital force that contrasts with the fatalism imposed by history on that latitude. A force capable of unexpected jumps and leaps of self-denial, perhaps even of heroism. It was the Arab Bureau's gamble.

We thought that, if the Arabs rose up against Turkish dominion, the entire scenario of the war would change. A new Middle East would be born from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, and Britain would be its midwife. With hindsight you can say that our projects are realised only halfway and that perhaps they were in the end too ambitious. But this is already a chronicle of our days.

At that time we were few, devoted to the cause, aware of how difficult it was to move the apparatus that hung over us. Our guide was Colonel Clayton, the head of the Secret Service in Egypt. The spiritual authority was without doubt Hogarth, a living encyclopedia of peoples, dynasties, and tribes of Arabia. That man is a well of knowledge and Lawrence was his *enfant prodige.* They knew each other from before the war and the relocation of Lawrence to our office was strongly recommended by Hogarth himself. I understand that now he returned to his job behind the desk at the Ashmolean Museum.

I know very little about Lawrence's past. I think that his family is originally from Ireland, but he has the indelible mark of growing up in Oxford, in the shadow of ancient letters. He travelled, this much is sure. I remember that one time he mentioned a trip in France on a bike looking for Plantagenet castles. He also spoke about a voyage to Lebanon and Syria, on foot, armed only with an old pistol and a camera. I can only imagine that those first wanderings are responsible for saving him from an obscure academic destiny. He certainly didn't have the right family name to make a career. He participated in the archeological excavation in Syria and in an expedition in Sinai together with Leonard Woolley. And this is all that I know about him before our meeting in Cairo, in '15.

It was difficult not to notice him. He used to walk around without a bandolier and with his uniform unbuttoned. I don't think that the United Kingdom ever had a scruffier soldier. Our duty at the cartographic service consisted of mapping the movements of the Turkish garrisons, and to do this we had to gather information from whoever was willing to pass it to us. Lawrence was particularly qualified for this assignment. He had a strong memory for names and places and knew how to play his role like few others.

Together with Hogarth he published an entire newspaper, *The Arab Bulletin*, whose goal, among others, was to give us the rules of behavior to deal with our interlocutors beyond the Sinai. The result was that it irritated the General Staff. Lawrence's frank way of speaking shocked the complacency of the bosses. In a certain sense he was accusing them of ignorance. For an unknown reason, however, he was respected regardless of his rank and was allowed to speak on the merits of salient issues. It was as if an aura of madness enveloped him and protected him from reprisals. Don't the ancient cultures consider the mad ones touched by the gods?

He even managed to get himself sent on a mission abroad, first to Athens, then to Mesopotamia. But the negotiation that he conducted with the Turks to obtain the liberation of our garrisons from under the siege in Kut completely failed. We expected to see him fall in disgrace, thrown down into the lowest ranks of the administration. Instead, he succeeded in tagging on to Ronald Storrs, our second commander, on his way to the Hejaz.

A few months before, King Hussein of Mecca had revolted against Turkish rule and had entrusted the command of the operation to his sons. Their forces, however, were small, poorly equipped, the Turkish artillery had pushed them back twice already outside Medina. Without reinforcement and ammunition, the days of the Revolt were numbered. The High Command thought that it was nothing more than a ploy to divert the attention of the Turks from the Suez, but after the defeat of Gallipoli they were compelled to rethink the entire strategy of the

Southeast Front. So the Bureau obtained carte blanche and decided that Storrs should go to meet the sons of King Hussein to test the waters of the Revolt.

I don't know why the top leaders accepted that Lawrence accompany him. Perhaps because they gave little importance to our expectations in Arabia and could not wait to remove a petulant nuisance. Or perhaps the man of secrets really had a few friends in high places, as he enjoyed making us believe. And so it happened that he crossed the Red Sea and became our Joker in a hand dealt with Kings, Jacks, and Queens.

I remember what he told me when he came to say goodbye before leaving: "If this Revolt succeeds, it will be the biggest event in the Near East since the conquest of Suleiman the Magnificent." Roaring words spoken as if they were the most banal in the world. This is Lawrence.

I think that for him Arabia was a "road to Damascus" moment. When he returned he spoke to me with enthusiasm about Prince Feisal. He said that he had found what he was searching for. Then he left again.

I saw him again only in '17. He was dressed as a Bedouin and he stank. He had crossed the Sinai on the back of a camel, practically alone, to bring us an Arab army.

It was then that the agreement with General Allenby was made. Those two liked each other from the start and found a way to be useful to each other. The rest is part of the war chronicle and of the triumphal advance of Allenby to Damascus.

This is what I can tell you to satisfy your curiosity. It's about a very strange man, elusive. I'd call him devious if I weren't afraid to appear unjust. I'm certain you would never follow my advice not to form any close bonds with him, so I'll spare you.

Is it too much to hope that in the next letter you let me know about yourselves? If my calculations are right, the unveiling of the mystery will happen soon: Will the Graves have a masculine heir that our father awaits anxiously? Give my best regards to everyone and kiss little Jenny. Above all, a massive good luck to your wife Nancy from me.

Expecting good news, your brother,

Philip

15. Soviet

Jack realised how late it was only when he closed the gate behind him. He cast a glance at the little house and pretended not to see the shape behind the glass window. He calculated that he would never arrive at college before the bell toll, but he got on the bicycle and pedaled until Cowley Road, with the tires sliding on the wet asphalt. He could not avoid the thundering rain that pelted him a little later. It lasted long enough to transform his clothes into dripping rags. When he crossed Magdalen Bridge and sped onto High Street, his legs were hurting. He stopped in front of the University College gate, tied the bike and went in.

On the second flight of stairs he heard voices, he detected presences, he could almost feel the body heat of people crammed into the sitting room upstairs. He half opened the door and sneaked in.

They were all there to listen. Nobody noticed him. Except Darsey, who signaled to him to go behind the speaker and join him. The speaker was Walton, one of the oldest, who earned the rank of captain during the last German offensive. He spoke in a loud voice, as if he were still inciting his men to resist.

". . . At St. John's they organized a student council to improve the conditions of the dormitory, cafeteria, schedules, school rules."

A voice rose from the end of the room.

"Do you mean a soviet?"

Walton did not blink.

"All of them used to be soldiers, like most of us in college. They are disciplined and have organizing talent. Things that aren't lacking in anyone who has been in the war."

Some were smiling, exchanging comments and murmuring, others nodded seriously.

Jack walked along the wall. He did not want to be noticed but wanted to get to bed without giving any explanation to anyone.

"Something similar is happening also in other colleges," continued Walton, "at Keble, for example, at All Souls."

"Of course! They have the Prince of Mecca!"

Many laughed. The one who had spoken received a hearty pat on the shoulder.

Walton nodded.

"Sure. It wouldn't be a bad idea to form a delegation to talk with Colonel Lawrence and ask him to represent all the students."

The giggles became nervous.

"Yes, let's form a socialist, soviet emirate!" someone suggested.

Jack felt their excitement. They were joking to alleviate the tension of the moment. They were young, had escaped death, and felt as different from the others walking the land of the

country, at least as much as they felt like brothers to every survivor. Jack thought that even for him it would be easy to enter this ephemeral harmony, but something was blocking him. The needle pointing north was the sense of responsibility, the anchor that was holding him firmly on the ground and allowing him to bear the weight. He was too old and tired to waste time in politics.

He slipped away from Darsey and without speaking he made him understand that he would go to sleep. The other indicated Walton, then shrugged and returned to listen. Jack reached the room, took off his jacket and shirt, picked up a towel and went into the bathroom where he started to dry his hair in front of the mirror.

Moran was shaving by the lamp, his face full of soap.

"Why aren't you over there?"

He had the usual annoying tone.

"And you?" rebutted Jack without looking at him.

The scraping of the razor blade on the skin gave him the shivers.

"Much ado about nothing," said Moran with a self-satisfied expression. "They sense the arrival of spring and they stamp their feet. The tumults of last year did not change things, and they would like to succeed now. . ."

"Without guns it isn't a serious thing, right?" pursued caustic Jack. "But I don't think you're in Ireland to fight for independence."

Moran shrugged.

"At least I've not fought for those who occupy my country, like certain fools I know."

Jack swallowed his anger without responding. Moran continued shaving.

"Where were you?" he asked after a few seconds.

"I don't think it's your business," answered Jack.

"And if someone tips off the deans?"

Jack stared at his expression in the mirror.

"How do your IRA friends treat snitches?"

Moran sneered.

"You're foolish, Lewis, if you believe that in this place one can keep a secret."

Jack thought of turning around and striking him, but he didn't want to give him satisfaction. He was tired enough, but not too woozy to lose his temper. He finished drying himself and picked up his things.

"Who's Paddy?"

The question lodged between the shoulder blades. Jack froze, hunched, while the razor blade went through him. He would have wanted to play dead, like a trapped lizard.

He heard the other put away the razor and brush in the case.

“There’s only a thin wall between our beds. Haven’t they told you that you speak in your dreams?” Moran walked behind him with a mocking expression. “’Night, Lewis.”

Jack had to wait for his breath to become light and regular to re-enter the room.

16. The Fairy Queen

He turned to look for Edith and saw her motionless with her arms across her chest, a few steps back.

“Let’s go. Don’t be silly, it’s Sunday.”

Ronald looked around. The churchyard of St. Aloysius was not crowded. The Catholics in the city were a small sect, but he did not like to get noticed in this way.

He went back.

“I don’t feel better telling my own business to a stranger,” she said. “It’s just embarrassing.”

He sighed.

“Edith. . .”

“It is a medieval thing,” she added, irritated. “I want to talk with you, not with a priest.”

By now everyone had entered. Ronald took her hands.

“Do it for me.”

Edith cheered up, sighed, then resigned herself to follow him into the church.

When they found themselves in the open air, a ray of sunshine hit them. It was cold, but she insisted on taking a walk. John was entrusted to her cousin, and they could have a free morning. Ronald was happy to oblige. The last weeks his work did not leave him much time to be alone with her.

“In a nice place,” said Edith,” I want a lawn. Trees.”

They crossed the town centre arm in arm. They passed by Exeter College, and Ronald had fun telling a pair of anecdotes from his student days. Then they remained silent for a long time. The small clouds slipped away rapidly, revealing the turquoise sky. They felt unburdened. They passed under the Bridge of Sighs and went by New College, accompanied by the grim gazes of the monsters decorating the walls.

Ronald knew that she did not like Oxford. The snobbery that one could breathe in the air made her feel inadequate and out of place, and there was little that he could do. Except making her appreciate the more hidden treasures.

They reached the High and at last the Botanical Garden.

Ronald took her to the end, near the surrounding wall, where the gaze could not help but look above, at the majesty of a big tree. Seven tapering branches rose from the main trunk, bifurcating until the top, at least thirty metres in height. Despite its massive size, the tree suggested dynamism, as if it was petrified during a twist. The grey bark, veined with black, resembled the skin of a dinosaur.

Ronald introduced it like an old friend.

“*Pinus nigra*.”

She instinctively touched the rough bark. At its base the trunk was wide like that of a centuries-old oak tree.

She looked high up where the grey green roof of needles protected them from any inclement weather.

“It communicates a sense of force and peace, doesn’t it?”

Edith nodded.

“Of antiquity.”

Ronald smiled.

“It’s more than a hundred years old.”

She looked at him, bright-eyed and excited. Ronald remembered when she had danced and sang to him in a forest near Roos, in Yorkshire, on a clear day like that. She had twirled on the meadow like a fairy. It had been a peaceful intermission, while waiting to go back to the front or within the walls of a sanatorium. Edith was the life, the serenity that the world had lost for good. Her ideal place was here, among the trees and the creatures of an enchanted forest. That vision had inspired his tale of Beren, the human mortal who falls in love with the lady of the elves Lúthien Tinúvel. The story of their love and their endeavours would narrate that of Edith and Ronald, the difficulties that they had to overcome to get together, to be able to marry, to have a life together. Ronald had written it for her, for them.

He noticed that the fairy queen had just spoken. A few magical words that transformed their existence again. Ronald opened his mouth and closed it again, drawing in his breath and feelings.

I'm pregnant.

They embraced for a long time, in the shadow of the old tree that protected their union. He whispered sweet words to her in fairy language.

The musical notes flowed across the rooms. In the new house Edith could finally move the piano and resume playing. It seemed to Ronald that his wife's clear high spirits reverberated in the sonata; the life that was growing in her gave rhythm to the andante movement.

Things would change with another child; behind the euphoria that spread in him, the urgency of making choices was sneaking in. He would have to abandon his work on the *Dictionary*. For some time already he had been skeptical about the usefulness of continuing, but another mouth to feed was like an ultimatum. He imagined the sad expression on Bradley's face when he would present his resignation. An air of "another one bites the dust" while he would accompany him to the exit, wishing him good luck. Giving private lessons was much more profitable. He had already received requests from new home-schooled students. Perhaps that was his path.

Certainly there would not be time for legends. It was common sense to relegate them definitively to the attic until the children had grown enough to hear them.

The visits to the Museum should also end, which was a pity, because the chats with Lawrence and Hogarth had been the most interesting of the last months. If anything, they have helped him understand how much he had missed male friends to share stories and ideas with. After the war, nothing was the same any longer. Rob and Geoffrey were dead and Chris was living in Somerset.

The music distracted him from the bad thoughts and lulled him to the woods and clearings of the forbidden land that he kept between the pages and his mind. It was crossed by streams that carried sap to the living, the water preserving the sound of creation. Without wanting it, he set words of his invention to the melody, sweet, euphonious, perfect for singing. The book of Anglo-Saxon grammar slid to the side of the table. The hand slipped to the notebook with the rough cover, then under the edge, like a dress, finding the sensual consistency of the pages to the last tale he had written.

In the beginning was the music. A melody emanating from the original Being, the demiurge who had sung the universe for the first time, the Eternal Lord, who resides beyond all, who had taught his angels the music of the spheres. From here the ethereal elves would have originated, the humans, the dwarfs, but also the lower and evil creatures, offspring of cacophony and the ambition of the fallen angel: orcs and goblins, the afflictions of the world.

The perpetual creation, so the High Elves would name it

Reality called him back to order with the strike of the pendulum clock. He closed the notebook and set it inside a drawer. That was enough. He had to prepare comprehension exercises over *Beowulf* or the following day he would not have the lesson ready.

He reviewed the lines that related the meeting between the hero of the Geats and the Danish king. Beowulf introduced himself in the presence of the sovereign and offered to liberate the palace from the orc that threatened it.

17. Ultimus inter pares

At the foot of the door there was a card with his name on it and a message. Robert bent to pick it up. Only a few words: “In the hall.”

It was rather unusual for T. E. to lunch with others. Normally he had his meals served in his room and only when he wanted to eat, something that happened rather rarely.

Robert felt his heart pumping fast. The unexpected circumstances were upsetting the precarious steadiness of his nerves, which depended on a planned day of rigid schedules and pre-arranged tracks. Even wasting time was part of a precise scheme, which at that point was in danger. He had lingered in Professor Murray's office, discussing Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and had left, anxious to get to All Souls for the appointment. He was slightly late but did not expect to find no one. He drew in a couple of deep breaths and at that moment the voice of Burnes, the attendant, reached him from the small service room.

“Did you find the message, sir?”

Robert showed the piece of paper, clearly appearing somewhat lost.

“Maybe I should call again later.”

“Oh, no, sir. You’d lose the best part.” Burnes instead was amused. “They are all down in the hall. It’s better to hurry up.”

Burnes closed the door behind him.

“It had been three hectic days, something hard to believe. Colonel Lawrence slept very little. I’ll show you the way.”

He started to go down the stairs. Robert stayed for a moment on the landing, uncertain what to do, and then he followed.

“I’m sorry I can’t offer the beer served at the hearings. But if I did, Mr. Lawrence would be disappointed. After all, he gave us the idea.”

“What idea?”

Burnes stopped at the last step and turned to look at Robert in amazement. Only in that moment did he realise that he was in the dark about everything.

“The strike, sir. Do you really know nothing about it?”

Robert shook his head, dumbfounded. He had just heard the most strident word that could be pronounced within those walls.

He found himself in the courtyard, following Burnes, who had already driven away his astonishment with an outburst of enthusiasm.

“It’s because of the new orders of the dean. The management has decided to prolong the working hours with the same pay.” He lowered his voice. “Someone called it a dirty trick, respectfully speaking.”

They went along the lawn in the direction of the hall.

“We’re not servants, we. They can’t decide over our heads without even consulting us. Kitchens, laundries, cleaning, care of the premises. If one penny or one shoelace is missing, they will come to us. If the food is disgusting, they take up the matter with us, even if the management saves money with suppliers.”

While Burnes was speaking, Robert lined up the clues he encountered while arriving there. Students without caps, advancing to the courtyard. A couple of professors exchanging angry comments under the portico.

“*It’s unheard of*.”

“*Unbelievable*.”

And now that word, the most incredible.

Strike.

Something had been happening for some time. An orderly chaos was shaking the colleges, animated by veterans. It was as if the threshold of the collective attention was unexpectedly raised to unknown heights. People were questioning, even the small details of communal life.

The first victory won by the students of his college, St. John’s, caused much sensation, guided by a one-armed brigadier barely twenty-five. Thanks to the protests against the awful meal service, the Council of the Institute had to nominate a kitchen commission with a permanent representative from the enrolled students. A small skirmish that could foreshadow battles on a vaster scale. These were not mutinies of soldiers like the previous summer, but the proof that things could change even here, where every stone could tell the entire history of

England. *Tu quoque,* Oxford. If even the attendants were on strike, perhaps the times were really changing.

Robert regretted sleeping outside the city and not participating in that uprising. He was going to college only once a month, to pick up his check. He kept telling himself that it was only a few weeks before the birth and he had to stay with Nancy, the truth was that he was also not much at home; he was spending his free time from classes with Lawrence.

T. E. seemed amused at the idea that the students would take active part in the life of the university. He often sneaked into the assemblies of All Souls, to listen to what was being said. Once Robert had accompanied him to hear him discuss the necessity of landscaping the lawn of the Quadrangle that was reduced to a pitiful condition. But his words were not taken seriously. Everyone had thought it was an act, a way of showing sympathy for the troop by one who must have other concerns on his mind. For example, the destinies of the Middle East, or the draft of his important memoirs. When he had seen him hurt, Robert realised that T. E. was, instead, very serious. He wanted to participate—like the *ultimus inter pares*, T.E. told him—and if they did not want to listen to him he would do it by himself. He had tracked down a mycologist from the Biology Department to explain how to throw spores into the courtyard and let the mushrooms grow. So they would have no other choice but to redo the grass. Robert had advised him against this, teasing him: his was a "solitary flight forward."

He emerged from his reflections and struggled to follow Burnes, who was still speaking.

". . . and he said: 'Cut off supplies.' Yes sir, just like that. We didn't even realise he was there, but I suddenly recognized his voice at once. We all turned. He was in a corner peeling an apple. I think he was down in the kitchen because he was hungry, or he had heard about our meeting, who knows. Someone pointed out that they could get rid of us. We're not workers or miners, those are organized." Burnes slowed down, smiling. "You won't believe it, sir. He stood up, came amongst us and said: 'Do you think that on an empty stomach and without clean underpants the chancellor can dictate conditions?'"

Burnes shook his head and stifled a giggle.

"This morning the Council of the Institute signs the surrender."

They found themselves in front of a forest of heads and stretched necks on the doorway step of the hall. Robert took advantage of his stature to get a clear view of the tables. They were not set, no one had prepared the hall.

Strike.

Someone was saying that not even the rooms had been cleaned, blankets and sheets were still piled up in the rooms.

Strike.

Robert laughed. It was really happening.

He looked for T. E. and found him leaning against a wall, all by himself. He observed the scene without hiding his pleasure. The chancellor received the requests of the attendants and was undecided on how to behave. No one had prepared him for this event, because no one had ever organized a strike in the university. He only managed to appear more of an idiot than he was. The cohort of the professors gathered around him, while he announced that the provision on the working hours was withdrawn.

Robert started to clap, followed immediately by Burnes and slowly by students who attended the event, until a long applause filled the hall. From his corner, T. E. turned and bowed to them, and gave a flattered smile.

"You should also put in a word for them," Robert said.

They walked into the large courtyard, under the cyclopean eyes of the sundial. The students who exited the library would stop to shake T. E.'s hand or would wave at him. Robert wondered about the reason for that *promenade*, if not to savour the admiration of the moment.

"Many have met too many untrustworthy officers not to appreciate a fellow like you."

"I'm not a guide, not anymore." A bitter smile. "Not one of those good ones, anyway."

Someone shouted hurrah, from the other side of the Quad.

"What you did in the war says the opposite. They only want to hear a story that can inspire them. This is what stories do, no? To instill courage, to feel less alone."

T. E. looked sidelong at him.

"I see a beanpole among the group."

"I admit," Robert said, "I'm curious. How long do you need to finish?"

He sensed a sudden stiffness in him.

"Hogarth asked me this too. The answer is the same: I don't know."

The tone was cold, enough to signal that an invisible line had been crossed. Robert restrained himself and decided to change the subject.

"Did you read my collection?"

T. E.'s small body relaxed. He slipped his hands into his pockets, content that the ball was in the other court.

"*Country Sentiment.*[xii] I read it. The title reflects the change."

They were coming back, walking slowly, towards the small courtyard and the lodgings.

Robert continued to listen.

“No references to the war,” proceeded T. E. “Even lullabies and doggerel. Some idiot will say that Graves mellowed. As for me, I would like to know where this new course is going.”

Robert nodded. They took the stairs and reached T. E.’s room. The sweet and spicy aroma assailed Robert as soon as he crossed the doorstep.

“Did you also take a look at my new poems?”

T. E. invited him to sit. “I did what you asked me to do.” He pulled out from a drawer a stack of typed sheets.

“The annotations are in pencil.”

“I will have to repay you in some way.” Robert stretched out a greedy hand, but T. E. began to leaf through the stack.

“Well, what do you think?”

T. E. stood up on the base of the fireplace.

“‘Return’ is my favourite:

The seven years’ curse is ended now

That drove me forth from this kind land,

From mulberry-bough and apple-bough

And gummy twigs the west-wind shakes,

To drink the brine from the crusted lakes

And grit my teeth on sand. (lines 1-6)[xiii]

A smile. “Here I am at the mirror, wondering if it really ended.”[xiv] He handed the envelope to Robert. “I’d have something to say about the images in the second stanza. Thirst is not “empty.” Thirst is a heartbreaking agony that leaves you with the mouth wide open, staggering like a drunk until you lose your balance. And the stone doesn’t crumble in the heat, but in the rain. The heat at most polishes it, splits it, blackens it, and often deforms it.” He smiled again. “But these are the quibbles of one who really risked dying of thirst, don’t pay any attention.”

Robert took the papers.

“You can be an inspiration.” He indicated the buildings of the college, outside the window. “You can make them feel united, after what they've been through.”

He saw him stroking the clay statuette.

“I have no intention to deceive anyone anymore.”

“And the attendants?”

“I only wanted to see the expression on the face of the chancellor.”

He became nonchalant now, as if chasing other thoughts.

“If a small part of what Lowell Thomas recounts is true. . .”

Robert was silenced, faced with his raised hand.

“Please. Thomas made a vaudeville idol of me. I should have known it the first time I met him in Jerusalem, instead of posing for him.”

“Don’t you wonder why you did it?” insisted Robert. “Perhaps because you believe in the power of stories as much as I do.”

“He wanted a hero to show off to convince the Americans that the war was a good and just thing. I played my role.”

“You wanted everyone to talk about the Revolt, to know about it. He was useful for this purpose.”

T. E. grimaced. “To whose purpose”? He looked up at the portrait over the fireplace. “We had the Arabs fight in exchange of a promise that we knew couldn’t be kept: independence with Damascus as capital. We divided their land with the French and now at Whitehall they are taken aback because the Middle East is in chaos.”

He stopped, anger fading in an instant.

“You wrote about it in the newspaper, everyone read it,” said Robert. “For this they admired you still more.”

“You don’t understand,” T. E. quipped. “If I were really what they believe, I would be still down there fighting. It would be the only way to redeem me.”

Robert saw his face darken. He was aware that what he was about to say would not change his friend’s mood.

“You’re writing the story of the Revolt. This also is fighting.”

The other nodded.

“It’s the only reason that I accepted to do it.” He pulled out a paper from his pocket. “You said that you want to repay me. I need your advice.”

Robert ran his eyes over lines written in pen.

“Did you write it?”

“I would like it to become the epigraph of the book. Would you help me?”

“Gladly.”

“I would be very grateful if you read it later.”

“Certainly,” said Robert holding back his curiosity.

He folded up the paper and put it in his pocket.

“Seeing that the strike is over, Burnes will absolutely want to offer you a drink. I’m going to call him.”

When he remained alone in the room, Robert had to force himself not to think of the poem he had in pocket. It would have been embarrassing to be found reading it. He stood up and went under the portrait of Prince Feisal. He questioned that gaze as if it could reveal to him the secrets of the man who had fought on his side. He inspected the shelf, without touching anything. The brass bell supported two tattered books and one better preserved.

If you want to know something about a man, find out what he reads.

The titles on the spine were scratched and disfigured from use, but they could still be deciphered.

Wadi Safra, Hejaz, June 1916

The Prince is a statue of white linen. The ruby headdress frames his thin, emaciated face. The long eyelashes hang over his eyes, hiding his gaze, as if the eyes had seen enough to not want to look again. The voice is a soft sing-song.

"We are linked to the British by necessity, but we are aware they are too powerful allies. Many of our people believe that your help isn't neutral and that sooner or later you would establish yourselves here. That you will take our country, as you did in Egypt and Sudan."

"Your Highness, the British also fight in France, but the French are not afraid for their liberty."

"The Hejaz is not France, Lieutenant Lawrence. It is a weak, divided country."

A gust of wind filters through the curtains, carrying the scent of earth and vegetation, distant calls, camel fights.

Every reticence would be out of place, the cards are on the table, sincerity is the only winning hand.

"This is the wager of the Revolt. To transform the Arabs into one nation. To make them able to decide for their own good."

A deep sigh. The Prince moves towards the cushions that surround the low, big table and pushes aside the flaps of his mantle.

"Your idea of good is very different from mine. A good imposed by violence is a cause of pain nevertheless."

That man knows he has no choice. Manifesting his own sorrowful awareness is his own way of letting him know. Lawrence cannot but insist.

"I think that the dreams of the Arabs and aspiration of Britain can coincide. I am here to make it possible."

Feisal sits down and gestures to him to sit down on the carpet next to him.

It is done.

One clap of hands and dates and freshly drawn milk are served. The Prince waits for the guest to help himself, before revealing his final thought.

"It's difficult to be devoted to two masters. There's only one type of person who can do it and it's he who fights for himself. But I do not envy that man, because he really embraces no cause. His is a solitary path."

18. All Souls

“Colonel. . .”

He glanced away from the flames and memories. Someone has just touched him.

“Colonel, do you feel all right?”

A freckled boy with a hint of thin moustaches.

He squeezed himself into a corner of the sofa.

“Yes . . . certainly, yes. Thank you.”

Ned looked at the wall clock. Half an hour had passed in one minute. Someone must have worried seeing him staring at the fire like that. He noticed that it was snowing outside. Big white snowflakes were sticking on the window panes and sliding down.

The boy sat down.

“My name is Neville. Desmond Neville, sir. I was wondering . . . May I ask you a question, sir?”

He took a better look at him. He wondered if it was naivety that gave this young man courage. He noticed that the few students in the Common Room were quiet and listening to the conversation. He imagined that they had drawn lots for coming forward, but perhaps it was his malice born of depression.

“We are no more under arms, Neville, and I’m not that old. My name is T. E.”

The other looked at him, hesitant.

“What is your question?”

An uncertain smile.

“What is the desert like? I mean . . . the first time that one sees it.”

He looked at the young man as if he had subjected him to an enigma. There was total silence, the breath suspended.

Seated on sofas, some on the floor, they surrounded him, captured by every word, in the dense stillness of the evening. They came few at a time, as the voice spread through corridors and rooms. The man who competed for fame with Francis Drake and Richard Burton had started to tell a story.

Outside, the snow was falling lightly, covering roofs and courtyards with a blanket of silence.

In the warmth of that union of souls, chosen as audience around the fire, Ned ran his eyes over the faces, almost needing to address every one of them, by first and family name, to thank him for his attention.

“I landed in Arabia convinced of one thing only: a revolt needs a leader to embody its spirit. As soon as I met him, I knew that the man I have been searching for was Prince Feisal, the third child of King Hussein. As a boy he lived in Constantinople and served in the Turkish army. He knew the diplomacy of governments, and could list in detail every weakness of his people. This awareness carved deep furrows in his face, even though he was young, and pushed him to counter fate with an extreme force of will. Down there in Wadi Safra, surrounded by his litigious and poorly armed people, frustrated by inaction, he was a diamond set in tin frame. The most genuine hope that the Arabs could nourish. He had the bearing, the magnitude of spirit, the honesty and intelligence to be a leader, but it was necessary to put him in a position to become one, and for this they needed arms and money. Quickly, before the Turks would understand that they could turn off the Revolt in one move.”

He stretched his hand to pick up a glass of water on the table. The silence was such that they heard him swallow. He put down the glass calmly, savouring the wait. And then he addressed them again.

“Before leaving again I gave as a token of our friendship the promise that things would change soon. I went to Khartoum and Cairo to persuade my superiors and obtained the reassurance that I asked for. I returned to Arabia as a military advisor to the Prince. I joined him in his new general quarters, on the hills behind Yenbo, a city on the coast held by our warship. I gave him the good news, redeeming his trust, and went back down to the city. I didn’t know that the Turkish roundup had already started.”

He stopped, distracted by the opening door. A latecomer tip-toed in, blushing with embarrassment, and sneaked to the corner.

“The morning after, the sounds of alarm woke me up. I climbed to the city’s eastern wall and from above I saw them,” with his hand he traced an invisible line in midair. “Two thousand horsemen filled the horizon. Feisal rode at the head, the sky tinted golden behind them. I never saw anything so majestic like that retreat. They had tried to resist the Turkish artillery with their scrap iron, then they had to scatter and abandon the camp. And yet the entrance to the city was triumphal. I realised that I had made the right choice, but that every effort could still turn out to be in vain. Had the Turks advanced as far as there, nothing would have prevented the sure defeat of the Arab army.”

He left them again holding their breath for a few moments, before continuing.

“I spent the night on one of the ships. I fell asleep, convinced that in a few hours the sound of gunshots on land would have woken me up. Instead, nothing happened. Dawn arrived and we understood that the Turks refused to attack.” His eyes flashed. “That night they lost the war. The fire of the Revolt was ready to blaze.”

The clock pendulum struck nine, as if even time was set to the rhythm of the story, but no one looked at his watch for confirmation. He had led them faraway, where hours lasted for days and weeks. Oxford was a remote place, a solitary island, surrounded by waves and fog, to which no one longed to return.

“We gathered the forces in order to move north. Five thousand camel riders and five thousand infantrymen. Machine guns and cannons, finally, and the support ships at sea. Even a hydroplane. We were aware that something great was starting. We stormed Um Lejj and Wejh on the coast. The Turks countered with little resistance, while with every passing day the Arabs were becoming more credible in the eyes of the British High Command. In Cairo they were enthusiastic and promised new artillery and money. They sent us two armoured Rolls Royce’s.” He paused. “But they told Feisal to stop.”

He left the sentence dangling in the room, as if to make sure that everyone was following, that no one went off the beaten track.

“The High Command wanted to us to cut off the railway tracks to isolate the Turkish garrison at Medina and force them to surrender. From their point of view fighting for the second holy city of Islam was the best one could offer our Arab allies.” He searched the eyes that surrounded him. “It is known that generals lack imagination.”

A giggle of approval spread through the bivouac that was about to face the night. Beyond the windows the city had disappeared into the darkness, buried under the snow.

“I couldn’t convince myself that Medina had to be our target. What was the point in persevering in the siege of an isolated city, when we could aim at the heart of the Ottoman Empire? To hell with Medina, I wanted Damascus. It was a waste to force the Arabs to fight a war of position, it was necessary to let them lead things in their own way. Strike and disappear, like the desert wind that suddenly blows, blinds you and moves away, leaving you only with a humming in your ears and guns filled with sand. The other officials of the British mission were too devoted to tradition to take me seriously,” he sighed, shrugging.

“Then Auda arrived. And everything changed.”

Lord Dynamite

Cairo/ The Desert of Al-Sirhan, May 1917

"A set of dentures."

Professor Hogarth leans towards the desk, his perplexed expression facing that of the disconsolate Clayton.

"Pardon?"

The officer looks at him over the paper he holds in his hands.

"He asks for a new set of dentures for a certain . . ." his eyes search the missive. "Auda Abu Tayi. Furthermore, he tells me that he won't participate in besieging Medina, because he doesn't share the goals and . . ." he reads again, "a contribution on his part without a desire wouldn't be useful for the operations. He is moving to the north in order to evaluate the possibility of extending the Revolt and storming Akaba. Nothing less."

With a tired gesture, Clayton lets the paper fall on the table.

"This letter seems to be the result of a sunstroke." A smile spreads under the professor's moustaches. "Do you find it amusing?"

Hogarth raises a hand apologetically.

"Pardon me. I've known Lawrence for too long to be amazed at his initiative spirit."

"Initiative spirit?" Clayton barely controls his voice. "I wonder if he takes into account that he's at war, under orders to serve."

The other sighs patiently and for a moment looks towards the window which frames the clear sky of Cairo.

"Tell me about the dentures."

The officer lifts the paper again.

"This Auda, a rather well-known bandit, apparently, arrived at the general quarters of Feisal. It seems that as a sign of loyalty to the Prince, he had refused to eat at his table with the dentures given to him by the Turkish Governor, Jemal, and had dashed it on a rock." His tone is incredulous. "Now, therefore, this man can't eat and needs new dentures. Lawrence asks me to send him an expert dentist from Cairo."

A look of admiration crosses the professor's face.

"Auda Abu Tayi is the leader of the Howeitat, the tribe of the most hawkish marauders in North Arabia. He is much feared. A legendary warrior, I daresay. Many stories are told about him. So far he has been paid by the Turks to remain neutral. The fact that he had decided to embrace the Revolt is a big deal for us, his influence is decisive in involving the other leaders of the region. If you want my advice, get him some solid English teeth. It is an investment that you won't regret."

The response is a low, resounding, grumble.

The professor decides to insist.

"The Turks don't expect an attack by the Arabs on Sinai. This can only be an advantage to our troops fighting in Gaza, and Akaba is the last Turkish port on the Red Sea, the last thorn in our side."

"We have already planned a naval attack on Akaba," retorts Clayton. "Lawrence knows about it."

Hogarth nods.

"But he also knows that the Gulf of Akaba is a *cul de sac.* Down there the Turks have long-range cannons, they can target the landing craft and nail the troops on the beach. The waste of human life would be immense, the result uncertain. If I know him, Lawrence wants to avoid another Gallipoli."

Clayton stiffens in his seat without responding. He uses the letter to drive away the hot air entering through the window, without much success. He puts it back on the table and remains motionless, examining it with uncertainty.

"So you suggest that I go along with his wishes."

Hogarth shrugs.

"As a matter of fact, we sent him down there for this. We have nothing to lose."

Clayton pulls on a moustache with a nervous gesture.

"Only the control of the Revolt."

"A revolt is by definition uncontrollable, Colonel. The only guarantee is the trust that the Arabs place in Lawrence."

Clayton assumes a resigned tone.

"It looks like that even for us, there remains no other choice but to trust him."

"Has he told you of his plan?"

The officer touches the letter.

“Pure madness. Crossing the desert on the back of a camel. Joining our informers in Syria and spreading the news of an imminent incursion on Damascus, to sidetrack the Turks. He intends to recruit the raiders of the desert and turn to Akaba. To take it from the ground.”

Clayton snorts in anger.

For the first time since he sat down, a shadow of worry crossed the professor’s face.

“When did he leave?”

“May 9. With thirty-five men and twenty thousand sterling pounds provided by Feisal.” A sidelong glance. “I hope he makes good use of it.”

The professor nods.

“The Bedouins are greedy. All that remains is to cross your fingers.”

The professor’s eyes wander again outside the window, his mind surveys the roofs of the city, journeys up to the Canal and beyond, along the path of Moses, across the desert, to hover over the tenuous theory about footprints in the sand.

The dromedaries move slowly in the rarefied air of the evening. The men seem very small on the backs of the beasts that are reddened by the mange. As far as the eye can see, rocks, dry sand, salty puddles, skeletal palm trees without leaves, and on the horizon, mountains as sharp as claws. A sinister and malignant air wafts around the small caravan, which seems a small thing in the midst of that immensity. Al-Sirhan is a cursed place, infested with reptiles that pop out of every cleft, where one dies poisoned by the lethal bite of asps and vipers searching for the warmth of bivouacs and bodies. In the morning one is never alone in bed. During the day, the sun crushes the living like a boulder, making every movement hard, every drop of water precious, every marsh harrowing. The desolation tests the spirit and the faith. Sometimes it gives birth to it, when every action becomes absolute, and the dazzling light projects its metaphysical shadow on the world. The mind cuts itself from the tormented body to the point that one risks losing himself, to the point of grasping the purest essence of things, the very idea of God, the mind that may be saved only at night, which grants rest and return to oneself. A small fire, under the breathtaking spectacle of the stars. The light hardly sufficient to leaf through pages and strain eyes over a few lines, where another undertaking is told, or a quest, through the Waste Land by a handful of knights.

“What are you reading, Urens?”

The hoarse voice of Auda reaches him from the other side of the bonfire. He is carving a piece of wood with his long, curved dagger.

The blue-eyed Bedouin puts the book down.

“An ancient story of my land.”

“What about?”

Nasir and the others are paying attention also, while kneading the last ounce of flour and chewing it slowly.

“About a legendary king. He was called Arthur. He sent his knights out in the world in search of a Grail that had collected the blood of Isa ibn Miriam, the crucified Christ.”

“Did they find it?”

“Almost all died in the quest. Only three survived. One of them only, the purest and most fearless, succeeded in finding the Grail. Sir Galahad was his name.”

Some exchange comments in whispers. Auda looks grim across the flames.

“How many were the knights of this Christian king of yours?”

“Hundred and fifty.”

A grunt of satisfaction.

“Auda will recruit five hundred of them and he will take Akaba, God willing. So one day someone will write the same about me, too”

The comments get louder.

“Someone should do it, yes. But it is dangerous to speak the words before the deed.”

The toothless mouth of the warrior opens in a sneer.

“You will see, Urens. You will see how old Auda works.”

At dawn, when the company divides, the small troop heading north can still hear the cry of Auda that resounds against the mountains.

“In two weeks, Englishman! If you delay, I will begin the war without you.”

The echo of a dour laugh reaches the warriors on the trail. The smallest one, wrapped in the dusty Bedouin garment, smiles under the cloth that covers his mouth.

One of the companions spurs his camel alongside of him.

“Urens, now you can tell me whom we must meet up north.”

“A photographer.” A look of disbelief on the other’s face. “Don’t be afraid, we’ll be at the appointment with Auda.”

The beasts are plunged in a slow trot on the softer soil.

19. Pitch-Black

It had been a tiring day, broken up into different tasks. He had shoveled the snow from Mrs. Moore's garden, oiled the gate so that the lock would not freeze, accompanied Maureen to a violin lesson, did the estimates of domestic expenses, cleaned the lumber room, and prepared dinner. Time had not passed quickly, he had to force his body to complete every task, ignoring fatigue and a migraine.

The journey on the bicycle up to college across the already dark streets, covered with muddy sleet, seemed twice as long as usual. After supper, while trying to snatch a few hours of study in the Common Room in spite of a headache, Jack found himself watching Darsey with resentment. His roommate was back from The White Horse full of beer and stories about Lawrence of Arabia. He had offered some beer to a pair of grant holders at All Souls, in exchange for some stories overheard in front of the fireplace. He was oozing enthusiasm and the smell of smoke.

He let him talk, pressing his pulsating temples with his fingers. Darsey was blathering about crossing on the back of a camel, bivouacs under starry skies, attacks on the railroad. He gave him no rope, but he also did not manage to interrupt him at all, immobilized by fatigue and the flood of words. His defences were starting to give way. Darsey was too fascinated by the romance of war in the desert to notice his indisposition, so the ancient rage surfaced again, little by little, a slow tide of frustration and disgust that choked him.

"An unbelievable story," Darsey was saying. "Incredible."

In Darsey's world everything had a positive implication as long as one looked for it, mistrust had no foothold in his world. He went looking for Jack, to sell him that naivety of a child who never grew up. Darsey had not seen the horror, he did not know what it was like to carry the burden of consequences on a bare back.

“Where were you, Charlie? An employee at the Ministry of War?”

The point-blank question stopped his friend. He looked at Jack in amazement, recognizing a threatening tone. He opened his eyes and arms wide as one who protests his own innocence.

“You know I was a paper pusher for two years. Do you want to shoot me?”

Jack put down some papers and leaned on the table.

“My brother is an alcoholic.”

Darsey observed him, confused. Jack was not used to confiding in others.

“He began to drink to drive away the fear that overtakes him every time he hears a noise louder than this.”

A sharp bang on the table. The violence of the action made Darsey jump. Jack continued.

“My clearest memory is the split open chest of Sergeant Ayers. Sometimes I seem to smell that odour, and I vomit and can’t eat.”

He was pleased with the fear that he read on Darsey’s face: the mirror cracked and the *papier maché* world on the other side was shaking. He would have wanted to smash the glass into pieces and crush them under his heels.

“But at least I’m here, no? I’m back. It could’ve been worse. How many friends are missing from the roll call? How many brothers, sons and husbands? How many arms and legs?” He had to lean back. “This place is empty. There’s no one anymore, only ghosts. Only widows and orphans to care for. Your Lawrence is not the one to do it. He brings offers of oases and princes in exchange for reality. A convenient trade, after all. Only God is cheaper.” He touched his wet forehead. “Here is the desert, Charlie. And it’s pitch-black. To get out of it fables and prayers are of no help, but the light of reason is.”

He combed his wet hair, which, however, fell in bunches again. He realised that he was covered with cold sweat. He must have had a fever.

Darsey shook his head.

“I don’t understand you, Jack. What do you expect?”

He slammed his fist again on the table.

The students who were chatting in front of the fireplace turned, but Jack did not notice.

“Only a little common sense. Your hero is a narcissist, good for the naïve.”

For the first time he noticed that even Darsey could be hurt. He saw him become numb, eyes half closed, confused. An animal ready to react instinctively.

“Jealousy is not all that rational.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your poets. Those that you admire much,” said Darsey, “they find him interesting.”

Jack drove away these words with his hand.

“You’re rambling.”

Darsey continued.

“Graves, Blunden, Sassoon. He wanted to know them all.” While Darsey was pronouncing every syllable one by one it was as if Jack could anticipate them, as if it were just the confirmation of how much he already knew. “They welcomed him in Parnassus.”

Jack stood up, pale, realizing only in this moment that the others were observing him, astonished. He reeled like a drunk. With an effort, he collected the papers and staggered towards the corridor.

In front of the door of the room he ran into Moran, with a towel at his neck and a sarcastic smile on his mouth.

“Here’s our anglophile renegade.”

He punched him in the face. Moran leaned backwards, his hands on his face, then someone pulled Jack away, pushed him inside the room and closed the door. He collapsed on the bed, without any energy.

“You’re batty.”

Jack understood that Darsey was feeling sorry for him, but he could not react anymore.

“Hope that he won’t report you.”

Moran’s coughing behind the door accompanied Jack in the darkness of his unconsciousness.

20. Spectres

He listened to the envelope rustling down the metal pipe. What is done is done, he thought. He could not continue to keep it to himself.

John Ronald.

This time they had talked. They had called him by name.

Gordon had finished reading the assigned lines, a stanza from *Christ II* by Cynewulf,[xv] and had raised his head awaiting instructions. An alert boy this Canadian, strong will to learn and a real talent for the ancient language. The best of the new learners. The first day the student called him Professor Tolkien, he was quick to say that he boasted only a degree, no professorship. Confronted with Tolkien's silence, Gordon must have wondered if he had made any errors.

"Your pronunciation is perfect, Mister Gordon," he had reassured him to cover up his embarrassment. But he would have wanted to ask him to turn around and tell him if he saw them too, Rob Gilson and Geoffrey Smith, standing at the window.

Certainly not. It was his mind that projected their images against the wall of the study. They stared at him, stood at attention, as if waiting to be examined by the sergeant, but they were still wearing their school uniforms.

John Ronald.

He had apologized on account of a headache. The lesson would be over a quarter of an hour early, which would be made up the next time.

Gordon had scuttled away in a hurry, with a guilty expression.

Ronald pulled away from the post box, like a swimmer who ventures to leave the buoy that keeps him afloat. He hurried over Giles Street and wandered aimlessly, listening to his steps on the pavement. He needed air, wanted to gain time before going back to the study.

John Ronald.

Left alone, he had taken paper and pen and started writing a letter to the only person who could help him.

Chris.

The other survivor of the old gang, generously spared by the U-Boot of the Kaiser.

It took a long time to choose the words. He did not want to appear confused, but rational and able to face the issue. He had told him of dreaming while awake. For some reasons he refused to define them as hallucinations. Perhaps he hoped that Chris would tell him that happened to him also, to have someone share his suffering. Chris was understanding and generous, he had always encouraged him and perhaps even understood him better than others. He could not imagine anyone who could comfort him better than he. Even Edith, who needed to be shielded from this problem. As he was closing the envelope and writing the address, he caught himself thinking of Lawrence, of their meeting at the Museum, months ago, and of the fact that he could speak with him also. In certain moments of innate intimacy it is easier to come clean with a stranger than with a family member. No implication. Only you, him, and God. He could not understand how someone could refuse such a comfort. Yet he was beginning to believe that his case was not a matter for a priest, but rather for a doctor.

He had said that he was going out to post a letter, but in a low voice, feeling like one who is running away. The women were too busy to notice what he said.

He walked for a long time. The street curved into a bend and turned south up to the sports fields cleaned by the snow. A game of rugby was under way. He stopped to watch the players, recognizing the colours of Balliol College, but not those of the opposite team. The playing field was too far away to be able to make out the shouts of encouragement.

He saw himself on the lawn of the Birmingham school springing fast on the lateral side, the ball tightly under his arm, with the opponents who were close behind him. A twist of the bust, just in time to get rid of the oval, before being run over and slammed down. He remembered the clouds above, as he lay on the muddy grass and tasted blood in his mouth. He could not talk, he was tongue-tied. A voice was saying that he needed to go to the infirmary.

A leap in memory placed him in a corner of the school library, bent over the alcohol stove to prepare tea that was forbidden in the afternoon. The Tea Club and Barrovian Society was in full force. Rob had brought one of his drawings and the reproduction of a painting by Luca della Robbia. Geoffrey, one of his poems written in his own hand and a tin of biscuits. Chris, some black tea found in the Barrow Stores.

And you, John Ronald, what did you bring?

He realised that he did not remember it any more. What was his contribution to the last meeting of the society? A passage from *Beowulf*? Or perhaps from *Sir Gawain*? He saw the perplexed faces of his friends awaiting a response, but his tongue hurt, as if they had not yet removed the stitches. Yet it seemed to him that the incident happened at least a year before the meeting. Distance was playing strange tricks of perspective.

He moved away from memories and continued to walk, half intending to go to the Botanical Garden. Instead, he turned around into a side street along the Magdalen College Park. Beyond the canal, the New Building towered alone in the middle of a clearing, solid and square, with a hundred anonymous windows. Beyond the gate, the deer browsed quietly under the trees, only one old male raised its impressive horns to look at the passerby. An ancient herd, the pride of the college, jealously guarded. They said that in the midst of the herd there was an exemplar albino, but Tolkien did not see any pelt lighter than the others. Once he had brought little John to see those majestic animals, and he was moved seeing the joy on his face. The noises of wonder were followed by crying at the moment of returning home.

He breathed deeply and looked behind him, as if noticing for the first time how long he had walked.

He kissed the little one and held him tightly, driven by an unmotivated anxiety, as if he had run the risk of losing him. A little hand clung to his hair, then he pulled his lip and he let him do it, with teary eyes.

He noticed that Edith was in the doorway of the kitchen.

“Have they moved the post box to the other side of the city?”

Ronald let his son curl up on his shoulder.

“I needed to go for a short walk.”

She smiled and lifted the little one from his arms.

“Edith?”

“Yes.”

“What would you do if I went mad?”

She smiled.

“I think that I’d take care of you. But what kind of a question . . .”

“It has happened to many people after returning from France. Certain pathologies can show up even after years.”

Edith shook her head, amused.

“Oh, not you, Ronald.”

He disappeared beyond the door, continuing to shake his head. He canvassed the study, hesitant. No one.

He sat at the desk and little later he heard her come in.

“Can you tell me what happened? Do you want to see a doctor?”

“No. No, I am only worried about you.” He put a hand on her enlarged belly. “And about the baby.”

She stroked his head.

“You're wrong, everything will be fine." Her eyes fell on a sheet of paper. “What’s this?”

“A form.”

“I see that.”

Ronald did not look into her eyes and hurried to slip it into a box. Then he thought it was worth telling her the truth.

“A position is open at the University of Leeds.”

She moved back and remained quiet for a moment.

“It’s far,” she said.

“I thought I’d try. Of course, it would mean moving again, but it would be a safe job. A stable career. I love to teach.”

His voice faded away. He waited for his wife’s reaction like a judgement. He would have preferred not to tell her anything until he knew something more concrete.

Edith approached him again.

“You’ll never go mad, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. You are like that oak tree in the Botanical Garden. A tree with firm roots.” She was teasing him. “Only not very tall.”

He pretended to resent it, then he exploded in laughter.

21. His Highness

Afore the time that Sir Galahad was born, there came in an hermit unto king Arthur, upon Whitsunday, as the knights sat at the Table Round. And when the hermit saw the Siege Perilous, he asked the king and all the knights why that siege was void. Sir Arthur and all the knights answered, There shall never none sit in that siege but one, but if he be destroyed. Then, said the hermit, wot ye what is he? Nay, said Arthur and all the knights, we wot not who is he that shall sit therein. Then wot I, said the hermit, for he that shall sit there is unborn, and this same year he shall be born that shall sit there in that Siege Perilous, and he shall win the Sangreal.[xvi]

"Do you have a lover, Robert?"

He raised his eyes from the book and turned to look at her, stunned. Nancy was in the doorway of the studio with hair colored by tempera and baby food. Jenny must have just finished lunch, and she was rubbing her eyes while standing between her mother's legs.

"Pardon?"

"Who's S. A.?"

Robert realised her misunderstanding and smiled.

"I have a hunch, but I'd like to know it too."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"You shouldn't look into my pockets."

"So as not to find love poems."

"So as not to form wrong ideas. Does it seem like my own writing? It's by Lawrence. It's the dedication to his book."

She looked at him with a hateful, arrogant smile.

"You can't stay away from him, eh?"

Robert sighed.

"He's my friend."

"You're pathetic. Such people don't have friends, only admirers and lovers."

"You can't say this, you don't know him."

"Oh, no, dear, the world is full of warriors who boast of their own exploits."

Robert raised his voice.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but that man has talent."

Nancy forced another malicious smile.

"It's clear that he has found his esquire. Have you told Siegfried? He'll die of jealousy."

He closed the book with a thud.

“Let me work.”

“If only you’d find the courage to admit it. The truth is that you all have a damn nostalgia about the war. And you want to know why, Robert? I think that you know it. Because down there, there was no woman to break your romance. Brothers in life and death. And we at home, to bear the stress of war.”

“We?! I don’t seem to recall that you did your shifts at the factory!”

Jenny’s crying interrupted him, as usual every time they quarreled. The crying changed into bouts of coughing and vomiting. She always pretended to suffocate to make them stop. She was reminding both that she existed and that they should not have ignored her.

Nancy took her into her arms and disappeared into the other room.

For a few minutes Robert tried to calm himself, without success. He was feeling guilty regarding the little one and himself for having let Nancy provoke him. He knew that the sarcasm was the payoff for his absence, something he actually deserved, and this awareness was making him more nervous. He grabbed his jacket and sought to put away his thoughts by rushing out of the house. He crossed the garden and took a path along the street leading to Youlbury. As his breathing was becoming regular, he recovered his calmness. The air was humid due to the rain that had just fallen, as if millions of droplets had remained suspended, to stick to his face and hair. He found the sensation pleasing and kept walking, rousing the indolent interest of a grazing horse. He did not slow down until the Arnold School camp came into view.

He stopped at the edge of the field and sat down on a fence. No sign of life as far as the eye could see. Only the flight of swallows and a fearless squirrel that crossed the field to reach the trees. He could be the last man left in the world.

A few days ago he had seen Peter again and his mood had worsened. He knew that he had arrived in Oxford, even though he never looked forward to the opportunity to meet him. Peter belonged to his past, before the descent into the Underworld and the slow ascent to the surface. Robert had repressed his emotions when they ran into each other, at a distance sufficient to pretend not to have seen or recognized each other. A healthy hypocrisy for both. They were not in school anymore, when natural impulses had to hide in twisted trenches, in the mazes of that masculine and sexophobic society. In a few years, the war had imposed on all a holy terror of virile, misguided love, the one that does not long for the beautiful death, but rather for the beauty of the figure. Making the black list meant social ostracism and all the bad things that one could imagine. Peter came very close, when a Canadian soldier had accused him of soliciting. It was the era of the 47,000 scandal, when a sacred fury against “the plague” of homosexuality was spreading all over the country. Robert remembered having thought that if that were true, as the great inquisitors maintained, that the Kaiser had infiltrated forces of effeminate agent seducers on the island to wear out the British manhood, it would be the final proof of his folly. Yet the newspapers had taken the bait and pressed the authorities and politicians, and more than a few felt in danger.

Luckily, the accusations against Peter were dropped, but since that day Robert found he had lost trust. In himself first, then in their friendship. The culture of suspicion infected his soul so that it pushed away the old passion, in order to feel on the "right" side. After all, he was a married man now.

He thought again of Nancy's words. She could always put her finger on his weaknesses. Robert was ashamed, because he knew that there was a glimmer of justification in what she said. It was an ancestral question, visceral, nestled in the virile mind since the time of hunting men under the Paleolithic stars. That slimy affection of men advancing side by side, cradling the thought that beautiful death is a destiny as desirable as love. When the monstrous, nonhuman reality of the war had been revealed to everyone in all its uselessness, and the eyes could not but see, what had remained was reciprocal mourning, having the back of one another, sharing tea before the rounds, the corvée and nocturnal guards, the gathering and burying of the dead. Since there was nothing heroic left in the misery of war that had reduced the soldiers to gravediggers, it had been compassion that kept them united in the common goal of survival. Today it was the sharing of the secret of what they had seen, lived. And that no one at home wanted to hear it told.

Who knows if Nancy was right. Perhaps he was looking for that ideal unity, letting himself be seduced by T. E's charm. Philip had warned him regarding his mystery. But yet T. E. was a riddle to be solved, work cut out for the poet who loved evoking myths.

Robert had long examined the clues at his disposal, to elaborate a plausible theory, which started with volumes on the mantelpiece.

If you want to know something about a man, find out what he reads.

The first was *Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Malory, a favourite classic of his adolescence. He had read it after years, with the new eyes of a detective, to retrieve the chivalric dream, the Great Quest, the journey, the romantic death. Something that carried over directly to the second book, the least unexpected: *Travels in Arabia Deserta* by Doughty, the story of the poet-explorer who first had crossed the Arabian Peninsula. T. E. talked about him like a demigod, he had met him before the war, and now that he also was a member of the "Arabs" of Albion, putative grandsons of the supreme Richard Francis Burton, he would carry it everywhere.

Lastly, there was the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, the anthology of English poets.
Now the thread was beginning to unravel.

For some reasons, Robert was convinced that those books contained the key of the dedicatory verses that T. E. had given him to annotate. He took out the poem from the pocket of his jacket. The images were good, but they had to be revised here and there, a couple of verbs could be inserted to make it still more vivid. He read it again.

To S. A.

I loved you, so I drew these tides of men into my hands

and wrote my will across the sky in stars

To earn you Freedom, the seven pillared worthy house,

that your eyes might be shining for me

When we came.

Death seemed my servant on the road, till we were near

and saw you waiting:

When you smiled, and in sorrowful envy he outran me

and took you apart:

Into his quietness.

Love, the way-weary, groped to your body, our brief wage

ours for the moment

Before earth's soft hand explored your shape, and the blind

worms grew fat upon

Your substance.

Men prayed me that I set our work, the inviolate house,

as a memory of you.

But for fit monument I shattered it, unfinished: and now

The little things creep out to patch themselves hovels

in the marred shadow

Of your gift.[xvii]

As he was folding the paper, Nancy's words began to resonate in his ears again.

Who is S. A.?

From centuries past it was precisely old Malory who suggested the answer to the mystery. The medieval poets dedicated their sonnets to a lady. Eleonore of Aquitaine as well as Queen Guinevere. Her Highness or *Son Altesse.* A tradition that went back to the court of Richard the Lionheart, the crusader king who had faced off with Saladin. The courtly knights, men of arms and poetry, marching to the Holy Land. One of them all *predestined for the great feat.* The pieces were falling in place, the mosaic was recomposing, foreshadowing a chilling picture.

If the hypothesis was true, then T. E. was not writing a war chronicle. Not only that. It was the *chanson* of the Arab Revolt that was taking form in the darkness of his room. A quest-within-a-quest, dedicated to an inspiring muse. A dead muse, according to the poem, still alive in the mind of the poet.

Robert wondered if perhaps he should go down to the city. He could ask him that, despite having the feeling that nothing more than that direct question could irritate him. He would take the risk, but not today.

He walked home, decided to make peace with Nancy, but after a few steps he saw a tiny man at the end of the road. He grew bigger and bigger, moving awkwardly in a hurry. His arms were flailing in all directions like those of a puppet. It took a while to recognize Edmund. He went to meet him, gripped by the worst forebodings.

"You're crazy," he shouted at him from a distance.

Ed tried to say something, but he choked. His lungs did not allow that exertion. He stopped, waiting for Robert to join him.

"Nancy," the lips said. The mouth was a perforated bellows. "The baby."

Robert started to run.

Lord Dynamite

North of Arabia, June 1917

"What are the stars, Urens?"

The two men are stretched out on the ground, under the nocturnal mantle, the only source of light as far as the eye can see.

"Thousands of suns. So far that our mind can't grasp the distance. We can study them only with a very powerful telescope."

"Why?"

"To make a list of them and name every one. So that the night is not a mystery anymore."

Auda crosses his hands under his neck, his forehead wrinkled in thought.

“Why do the Westerners always want to know everything? We Arabs can see God behind our own few stars and you cannot see Him behind all the celestial bodies that you study.”

“We want to know the limits of the world, Auda. We want to map out its borders.”

The old leader hisses through his teeth.

“This belongs to God. If the goal of knowledge is adding up the stars, one by one, then our ignorance is bliss.”

“Maybe so.”

“Tomorrow we will attack the Aba el-Lissan Pass. There are five hundred well-armed Turks. Would you like to know if you will die?”

“No.”

The Arab grunted with satisfaction.

“So you prefer ignorance too.”

The Englishman remains quiet, smiling to himself. The man near him continues to amaze him. For a minute the silence returns to dominate the night, unchallenged.

“Urens?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do up North?”

Auda’s wise discretion has advised him to keep from asking this question that he had from the moment they met, days before, waiting for the appropriate time.

“I went to see what to expect after we take Akaba.” The Englishman barely turns towards the leader of the Howeitat. “And considering that I don’t know whether I’ll die tomorrow, I brought you some photographs. Sometimes a little knowledge isn’t dangerous.”

The old marauder sniggers in the darkness and turns on his side to get some sleep.

Nasir’s lips are blistered by the sun and he blots the blood with his sleeve, as he slips into the shade of a rock near T. E. The gunshots ring less often now. All morning they filled the valley. It is clear that the battle plan did not work out, there is no need for the *sherif* to say so: the shots from the ridge of the hills did not push the Turks forward. They hold the narrow pass at the bottom of the valley, knowing that behind them is Akaba, perhaps their commander feels like Leonidas at Thermopylae, he is too shrewd to accept the fight in open terrain.

Nasir breathes in the heat, panting.

“We are running out of ammunition. What do we do, Urens?”

“I don’t know.”

There is no water, no air, the heat murders any thought. The rocks are broken slabs, the guns are pieces of burning metal. Someone has already had a sunstroke, leaving a smear of sweat as he was dragged away.

Auda walks between the hissing bullets which send chips of crushed stone flying, his face covered with dust. When he sees them hiding in the shadow, he grins amused and joins them.

“Tired? The Howeitat have just begun.”

“They are worthless. They shoot a lot and hit a little.”

The marauder stares at the Westerner with clenched fists and eyes bloodshot with rage.

“Get yourself a beast, Englishman. And come to watch.”

They get up, as Auda runs over towards the hill to call his warriors with a hoarse, bone-chilling shout.

“You have made him angry, Urens.”

“Exactly. Let’s go.”

They reach the dromedaries, then the top of the hill, just in time to see the horsemen lining up at the border of the basin. Nasir holds his breath.

“Look, Urens.”

The scimitar of the leader is raised to invoke over them the protection of God and the ruin of the enemies.

Auda!

The chorus of the warriors is a call for death that runs across the pack and clutches at the heart.

Auda!

A teeming of ants on the line of the Turkish defense.

Auda!

The blade falls. The tide of men swells, slowly then faster, the animals gallop down the slope, in a cloud of dust and deafening noise.

The two men look at one another, holding back there dromedaries.

The revolver shines in the sun.

The *sherif* raises the whip.

“Auda.”

Their voices join the whirlwind that invades the valley as the dromedaries plunge on. It is as if one is watching the world from the front of an avalanche. Someone is unhorsed, but nothing

can stop the scourge, Auda the Terrible, Auda the Wrath of God. The insects in front of them become uniforms, guns, men, faces, eyes open wide with panic, bodies run over, squashed, heaps of flesh and bones. The barrel fires repeatedly, the wobbly aim from the rump of the running beast, the aim of an Englishman at the centre of the storm, the dromedary collapses, crashes to the ground, and he flies away for a long distance like an acrobat at the circus but without a net, fallen to the ground, pumped with adrenaline, the fall stripping him of breath and sound.

The world is silent.

Before the Turks pounce on him.

Before the charge walks on him.

Before the bones shatter.

The mind flies away, elsewhere, clinging to a thought, to a few verses of a prayer.

For, Lord, I was free of all Thy flowers, but I chose the world's sad roses.

And that is why my feet are torn, and mine eyes are blind with sweat.[xviii]

Time passes, the heart beats, the noises re-enter the head a little at a time, the storm moves far away without touching him.

When he is able to sit up, he feels the still warm body of the camel that protected him, dividing the charge as a rock shreds the current of a rapid. The last heroic act of the beast that has brought him here. He looks at his pistol that he still holds tight in his fist and he understands. It was his bullet that hit the animal in the head. Sudden death.

Around him chaos is declining. The Turks are fleeing up the mountain, shot from behind, decimated, a trail of bodies along the way.

A little further, Nasir raises his arm in a victory sign, while he keeps an officer under fire. Auda comes forward limping, steps over the bodies, still shaking from the effect of the fight. The bullet holes are visible on the case of the binoculars, on the holster of his pistol, and on the sword scabbard. His eyes are shining, his voice a snarl.

"Deeds, not words, Englishman." He looks at the carcass run through the dust. "If you want to go to Akaba, you will need another animal."

The view from the hills is uplifting. Akaba is white at the bottom of the valley. Beyond a bunch of houses, the blue cobalt of the sea captivates the imagination, evokes refreshing dips and the end of suffering, diluted in this boundless expanse. Only the last trench interrupts the mirage, halfway from the goal, a stumbling block for the gaze that recalls the pain of wounds and bruises, the fatigue of the marches and battles. The last labour of Hercules.

All await Auda's order.

"This evening we will bathe in the Red Sea, Urens."

“How many times do you want to defeat the same enemy?”

Auda looks at him with mistrust. The Englishman points his riding crop at the defeated Turks.

“Three hundred infantrymen barricaded with the sea at their backs. They will fight for their life. Many of yours will fall.” He comes nearer. “Down there, there’s an officer who’s wondering if he has to sacrifice himself and his soldiers for the Sultan, for Jemal Pasha, for the Sublime Porte.[xix] It’s what is expected of him, but to do it he must deny his urge not to fight a losing battle, to see his wife and children again.”

“What do you know about him? What do you care?”

A sly look. “Get binoculars and watch.”

The old leader watches him tie a white handkerchief to his riding crop.

“I do not understand your way of fighting the war, Urens.”

The Englishman faces the descent, flanked by Nasir and Mohammed.

“I do not understand it!” Auda shouts back to him.

When they reach the defences the stench of rancid sweat, stagnant in the trench, knocks them down. The officer in command has on a wrinkled uniform and an unshaved beard. He invites them to sit around a camp table, under a tent that protects from the sun. The shortest of the three Bedouins uncovers his face, revealing eyes the color of sapphire. He turns to the military officer with a reverence that knocks him off balance. He speaks in Turkish. About being English and fighting for the Sheikh of Mecca. He informs him that the local tribes are gathered on the hills, planning to destroy them, not even the hand of the great Auda Abu Tayi can hold them back much longer. They will let the night pass, then it will happen as in Aba el-Lissan. He has come to offer an honourable surrender, for him and his soldiers. They will become prisoners in Egypt, in a British camp. They will fight no more.

The officer looks up at the hills which the sun has beaten all day long. Then he turns back to look at the sea in the distance, wrapped in the morning mist. The Englishman has not stopped staring at him. He speaks very few words in a soft, friendly voice.

He smiles at him calmly.

“One day the war will end and you will return home.”

The military man’s hand slips down to the holster.

Coarse fingers grasp the dagger, but with one move the Englishman blocks his companions and receives the officer's gun.

The final journey is a race to the sea, through tormenting sand which cannot stop them, gunshots towards the sky, alleys swarmed, the beach covered with hundreds of horsemen who

seem to want to continue the charge into the waves, yet still shooting at the long cannons, harmless now, that tower over the bay.

Then the noises go down until they die out among the ruins, the steps become tired and uncertain, it is difficult to recognize the faces, emptied from the anxiety of reaching their goal, but not yet satisfied. Everyone falls into the shade of the palm trees and remains motionless, watching the relentless breaking of the waves. A silent and ragged crowd at the edge of the world.

22. Polstead Road

The wind was blowing the rain on the few who ventured outside, the swollen gowns like birds' wings unable to fly. Ned could not remember anymore how long he had been in front of the window. When Burnes knocked at the door for the second time, without turning he told him to enter.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

He waited a few seconds before responding.

"Frankly, no."

"Can I be of service in any way?"

"Do you know how to chase away ghosts?"

"Only with whisky, sir."

He turned with a sad smile.

"Too bad."

"I'm sorry, sir." Burnes noticed the suitcase. "Are you leaving?"

"I have to finish my book."

“Don’t you like it here, sir?”

Ned quickly shook his head.

“Oh, no, everything is fine. I just need to be alone.”

“I understand. The ghosts are to blame.”

He forced a smile again.

“Don’t worry. I’ll return very soon.”

The downpour changed into a dense, sharp drizzle, pricking his cheek and rebounding on the leather suitcase which was tied to a mudguard in the rear. The wind had stopped knocking over everything, and this allowed him to pedal faster. He left the town centre behind and quickly glided, getting up on the seat. A man crouched under the umbrella on the pavement turned to see him pass.

As he was riding along the deserted street, he thought again of the decision that he had made. He had to leave that place, to isolate himself, to finish writing at all cost. Others’ admiration was a terrible workmate. Robert would be hurt by this flight, even though he was too busy with his newborn son. This could give him the opportunity not to disturb him and not to provide explanations. He would write to him from London.

When he turned on Polstead Road, the storm had regained its strength. He got off the bicycle and led it by hand beyond the gate, to the canopied shelter. He parked it in the equipment shelter, he dried his face with his hands and stood looking at the red brick building. He stared at the door for a few minutes, undecided, then chose to go to the back. He walked the stone path to the cottage at the end of the garden.

The windows looked like the sleepy eyes of an animal, the smell of wet grass was everywhere. A droplet was sliding from a leaf just at the extremity of a branch. It stayed still for a moment as if hoping for a different destiny than its peers. Then it resigned itself to fall without noise.

Ned listened to his breath, the vapor from his mouth vanishing an inch from his face. A laugh reached him from a remote time. He had never heard a more sincere laugh: the laugh of one who had never seen a bicycle before, while teaching him how to ride it.

Dark fingers were fumbling with the camera.

No, wait, you stain it this way.

He realised that entering would make everything more difficult.

As he was turning back, he noticed a shadow through the window of the house. He listened. He recognized the voices of his mother and his brother Bob. They were toiling in the kitchen as usual. He was envious of that regained normalcy. Faith made them able to accept every event as a divine sign. They could not understand his anxiety.

The temptation to ring the bell suddenly disappeared. He untied the suitcase from the mudguard and walked into the rain. If he walked fast he could get on the next train to London.

Iblis

Spring 1920

23. Mother

The young girl raised the bow gracefully, leaving the last note soaring in the small garden, until it became confused with the chirping of the sparrows. The guests applauded and Maureen bowed dutifully. Owen Barfield raised his cup in her honour, while Miss Wibelin was smiling, pleased with her work. Mrs. Moore complimented her before approaching Jack and touching his shoulder.

"After all, it's you that we should thank," she said softly.

Jack shook his head. The barter between the violin lessons for Maureen and his Latin lessons for Miss Wibelin was one of the deals he was most proud of. Like winning a luxury without paying a penny.

Janie Moore served lemonade again to the few guests. It was a rather hot afternoon in midseason, the jackets were left on wicker sofas. They reminded Jack of a pile of dead soldiers at the bottom of a shell hole during the attack in Arras. Some were without heads or legs, just like these garments. He looked away. He would not want to ruin the moment. Two weeks before, he had passed the exams with the highest grades, he was feeling good, senses awakened by spring, sharp outlines of things, vivid colours and reassurances. No ugly memories: peace with the world was the gift to himself this Saturday afternoon.

He noticed that Owen Barfield wanted to catch his eye to address one of his gibes. He pulled a face and hurried to sit with indifference near James Vaughan, the most taciturn of the guests. He was tall, blond, a little thin with sloping shoulders. Without a jacket, unbuttoned cuffs, and a relaxed posture, he had the vague air of a bohemian. Up until that moment he was hiding in the shade of the hedge, perhaps to protect his pale face from the sun or to sleep, pretending to be captivated by the music. When he noticed Jack, he drew his legs from under the table as if to apologize for their length.

"Impeccable performance," he said.

"Not quite true, but Maureen will appreciate your encouragement."

Jack noticed that Barfield was being accosted by Miss Wibelin, but he continued to look in Jack's direction, while waiting for him to break away. Jack thought that a chat with Vaughan would divert Barfield's attention and protect him. Vaughan was a painter, Barfield had met him in some course or other, or perhaps in a pub. It was difficult to say what type he was, but Barfield had guaranteed that he was discreet. He was certainly older than they, he could have been thirty but looked worn out, his eyes crowned with thin wrinkles, deep folds at the sides of his nose. For some reason he seemed to Jack vaguely effeminate, and that made him uncomfortable.

"Are you from Oxford, Mr. Vaughan?"

"Oh, no, I'm a damned Welshman," he slapped his cheek as if that was written on his face. "I was sent here to study and . . ." he smiled. "I found a comfortable niche. But, if you please, no Mr. Vaughan. Every time they call me so, my father comes to mind."

"All right."

"Relationships with fathers are difficult, don't you agree?"

For someone who stayed quiet for so long, he was rather confident. He had a warm voice.

“Without doubt.”

“How about your father?”

“Irish.”

“Oh.” Vaughan nodded, as if there was no need to add anything else. This time he caressed his cheek delicately. “Mine is an Army supplier. Since the time they judged me unfit for service in France because of asthma, in his eyes I am unfit even as a son. To make things easier for him I became a socialist and uncorked a bottle of his vintage wine the day the Bolsheviks signed the peace treaty. Can you blame him if he no longer wanted me in the house? Have you fought in the war?”

“Yes. Picardy.”

“Good, at least you don’t have to bear any shame.” Vaughan shrugged. “Not that it makes any difference to me. I paint, I don’t have to sip port at the Conservative Club with the males of my family.”

“If you live by painting you are a highly rated artist.”

“The only rates that I consider are those of my bookie. To keep me away from home my father guaranteed me a small income. Enough to give me a bored and cynical look at the world. But you never know. If I manage to do a portrait of Lawrence of Arabia, maybe I’ll enter obliquely in history. He’s back in Oxford, did you know?”

“Is there anyone who doesn’t know this?”

Vaughan grimaced ineffably.

“He is changed since he was studying here. He is more . . .” He lost himself in search of the missing word, made a gesture as if he wanted to grasp it.

“Have you met him?” Jack intervened.

Vaughan gave up looking for the adjective.

“We were both at Jesus College. You’re instead at University College, right”?

“What type of person was he? I mean before becoming who he is now?”

“You mean a living legend?”

“Yes.”

“Well, one time he took a pistol and shot outside the window, in Turl Street. Luckily, no one was passing.”

“Why the devil did he do this?”

“I don’t know. There are some people like that. The depressed, I think. Sometimes even I’m like that, but not in this way, that is, not really, I mean. The really depressed can hurt themselves and others. One can read it in their eyes, they are tormented souls.”

“And if I were one of his admirers?”

“I don’t believe that, Jack. You aren’t the type to court heroes.”

“How do you know?”

“You went to war. I could only read the poetry of Sassoon.”

“What type could I be?”

“Frankly?”

“Frankly.”

Vaughan half closed his eyes, as if sizing him up.

“In my opinion you are one of those who change. You are young, you have a great deal of time.”

“It seems to me that I never have enough time.”

Vaughan seemed to meditate deeply over his words. At that moment the complacent face of Barfield came between them.

“So James, you have been admitted to Jack's shelter? Welcome among the few chosen.”

“Don’t listen to him, he is a provocateur,” said Jack.

Vaughan sneered. Barfield sat in their midst.

“A pipe, Jack?”

“Why not?”

They loaded their pipes calmly, ostentatiously, while Vaughan was watching amused, collapsed again in the silence, in the chair, his legs stretched. Jack drew the match near the tobacco until a cloud of smoke rose slowly from the bowl.

“What were you talking about”? Barfield asked.

“About Colonel Lawrence,” responded Vaughan. “It seems that Jack is not attracted to adventurous stories that are circulating about him.”

Barfield puffed out the smoke.

“Oh, Jack is a strict rationalist. It is, in fact, strange for a poet. Though I have a suspicion that beneath his exterior he is crazy about fables and legends.”

“Those moderns attract me less. At least the ancients had the excuse of being ignorant. You won’t really want to believe the story of the desert hero?”

“I suspend my judgement, I don’t know enough about it. Yet I have to admit that . . .” Barfield suddenly fell silent.

Jack had sprung to his feet. They saw him flash past.

A little far away, Mrs. Moore stopped chattering and froze, as if under enchantment, cordiality transfixed on her face.

Jack crossed the gate, the pipe in his fist like a weapon, chasing a shade, certain to have seen him peeping inside the garden. He searched the street in both directions. No one. He hoped it was just his imagination. However, his vision had been sharp, at least for a moment. The livid and mocking face of Eric Moran spying on him. He clenched his fists until his knuckles hurt. He must have followed him. He had seen, desecrated the intimacy of his secret. Suddenly, he felt naked and defenceless, as if he were at the bottom of that shell hole, together with the corpse of Sergeant Ayers. He wanted to shout, but he could not emit a sound.

The guests left when the sun’s rays were already spreading between the branches of the trees. Barfield grasped Jack’s hand hard and kissed Mrs. Moore’s hand, in an old-fashioned style. He promised to return to visit them. He grabbed Vaughan under the arms and carried him away as if he was carrying a drunk.

“Sorry, but he just can’t hold his lemonade.”

Mrs. Moore finished re-arranging the chairs, while Jack was preparing a cold dinner. They ate like a family, but more quietly than usual, as if they needed to concentrate on Jack’s bad mood.

When they had finished, Jack prepared the hot water bottles for Mrs. Moore’s bed and said good night to the mother and daughter.

He sat on the small bed under the stairs thinking over the ghost of the afternoon. The intentions of Moran appeared clear. He had struck him, and Moran was vindictive enough to not let him get away with it, perhaps just to get the satisfaction of blackmailing him. How much could he have discovered? Had he come other times? The idea made his blood boil. He tried to ignore the weakness between his stomach and lower chest, but the agitation pushed him to stand up and walk around the room.

“Are you not sleepy?”

He turned, startled, as if he was caught doing something improper.

“I thought you were already asleep.”

She took him by the hand and led him to the bed.

“What is bothering you?”

She caressed his head, running her fingers through his hair. A gesture that he could remember vividly from childhood. He felt the consistency of that feminine body under the

clothes, and wished to be wrapped up by her, to disappear in the womb, return to the time before the war, before meeting Paddy, before death carried her away from him, before birth tore him from the perfect union. There was something similar to pity and passion in Janie Moore's gaze. He crouched under her, in a way that the two bodies overlapped. She did not stop caressing his head while he was uncovering her chest and brought his lips to her nipple.

"Poor Jack," she murmured.

Delicately he took off his pants and touched his sexual organ. He lifted her skirt. Only when he entered her did he notice that someone was sobbing. He was a nine-year-old child hiding in the attic in a house in Belfast, while on the lower storey the doctors were signing the last medical report. At every push the same word resonated in his head.

Mother . . . mother . . . mother.

24. The Invocation

He could recognize the placid smile of Chris on the way out of the railway platform. His height, together with a fair complexion and a strong chin, would make him look more like an actor or an American businessman than the son of a Methodist pastor. While they were shaking hands, Ronald felt already relieved, and he regretted having worried him to the point of coming to Oxford. He consoled himself with the idea that the letter had been an excuse to see him again. He picked up the suitcase, ignoring the protests of his friend, and they left the station.

"How's Edith?"

"Good. I only hope the summer won't be too hot. I admit I'm very anxious."

There was no need to remind his friend that the birth of his first son was a life-threatening experience for Edith.

"All will be well," said Chris. "How big is little Johnny now?"

“A little man, you’ll see.”

All the way home they did not talk about the reason for the visit. In the letter which would announce his arrival, Chris had not referred to Ronald’s call for help. He could appreciate that discretion, knowing he had turned to Chris for that too. Chris wanted to know instead about the teaching application in Leeds.

“I have submitted it. I’m awaiting a response,” Ronald cut short.

“How has Edith taken it?” hazarded the other.

“So-so. She has already followed me many times, but now it’s different. There’s John and the baby on the way. You know how she is, keeping things inside, but I don’t think she’s excited about the idea of moving again.”

“Well, I think you would be the best teacher of English literature.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Remember that you’re speaking with one who studies to become a headmaster. And then, dear fellow, I remember the TCBS meetings. When you used to get up on your toes to look taller and recite your poetry or passages from some old saga. . .”

“This is a different thing.”

“You’re wrong. It’s exactly that passion which helps to communicate something to others.”

They arrived home and Chris was greeted fully by the warmth of the Tolkien family.

He joked with Edith and her cousin Janet, and he gave John the gift that he had brought him, a tin toy car, and he was immediately at his feet. Ronald let everything seem normal. Edith should not know the real reason of that visit or she would be worried. Especially since the suspicion of having exaggerated was getting stronger, as the spirit of the reunion was invading the house.

At lunch roasted chicken with potatoes was served. Chris told the anecdote of how many members of the TCBS went to the Barrow Stores after the dress rehearsal of the school recital.

“It was *The Rivals* by Sheridan,[xx] right? We had not had time to change clothes, so when we took off our coats, we had the costumes still on. I’ll never forget the faces of the waiters!”

While listening to Edith’s laughter, Ronald thought that it is precisely that happiness, achieved with difficulty, which was amplifying the threat. It was the fear that the balance would not last. He was giving in to obsessions and this could compromise what he was trying to defend.

After eating, Ronald and Chris settled down in the study with pipes and a couple of glasses.

Ronald played for time, messing about with the tobacco, uncertain how to tackle the matter, but it was Chris who immediately relieved him from embarrassment.

“So it happened here.”

He looked around, as if the spectres should appear again.

Ronald nodded.

“Are you sure that they are really Rob and Geoffrey?”

“Yes.”

For a moment the spiral of the smoke enveloped them, and the sweet smell of the tobacco spread through the study.

“And they just stand here and look at you?”

Ronald shook his head.

“I have written you about it. The last time they called me by name.”

Chris drew the match near to the pipe and drew a series of puffs.

“Mmm. Visual and auditory hallucinations. I know that in London there are specialists in these pathologies. But I don’t think your case is that serious.”

“Who says it couldn’t become so?”

Chris did not answer, for a while he just smoked. Then he removed the pipe from his mouth.

“You know, I also miss Rob and Geoffrey much. Unfortunately, praying for them doesn’t alleviate the suffering. We are the only persons in the world that can understand it. Perhaps it’s not so strange that the pain is objectified in images. Even in the waking state, I mean.”

For a moment they remained silent, overwhelmed with memories of the Tea Club, which became later the Barrovian Society. TCBS, in the jargon of the only four members. It was a happy time before the accelerated maturation in the trenches. Ronald thought that he would experience nostalgia for these years even if Rob and Geoffrey had survived, but the fact that they had not made the act of remembering unfairly gloomy. He had to move on, to think of his family, to lock up the past in an old box, where he was also still keeping the last letter of Geoffrey B. Smith, together with the book of his poetry that he and Chris had printed after the war. The year 1916 had been a cursed year. Rob died the first day of the Somme offensive, while leading his men in the attack. Geoffrey in December, from grenade wounds that became gangrenous. From the ship where he was stationed, Chris had sent Ronald a letter with a few lines and a note that he had not forgotten. “I’m speechless. I humbly pray to the Lord Almighty that he considers me worthy of Him.”

He listened to his own voice bringing both back to the present.

“I don’t know what to do.”

Chris relaxed his face.

“Why don’t we analyse the matter in detail?”

Ronald nodded. He has known Christopher Wiseman for a long time not to expect some method. His was a mathematical mind, his specialty was unpacking problems in prime factors and solving them one by one. He again lit the tobacco and waited resignedly.

Chris made himself more comfortable in the armchair.

“Do you remember the first time it happened?”

“A little after the end of the war,” Ronald answered, removing the pipe from his mouth, “in the old house. I didn’t give it importance, it was a difficult period.”

“Then?”

“Here. One time at night, the other in plain daylight. A few months apart.”

“Different places and circumstances, then.” Chris touched his chin with his hand. “These . . . ,” he searched for the right word, “*apparitions*, are they always the same or do they change?”

“More or less identical. They’re always wearing the uniforms of King Edward’s School.”

“Nothing else?”

“No.”

“What were you doing when they appeared?”

“Nothing in particular, looking at my old tales. The last time I was listening to a student read.”

“Mmm. What was he reading?”

“Who cares? I saw them, not he.”

“You’ve said that you were listening to him. So?”

“The *Christ* by Cynewulf.”

“A passage in particular?”

“The invocation to the morning star. *Ëala Eärendel, engla beorhtast / ofer middangeard monnum sended* (lines 104-105).

The musical sound of Old English brought a smile to Chris’s face.

“For us common mortals?”

“Hail, Eärendel, the most luminous of the angels, / sent to the humans on Middle Earth,” translated Ronald.

He stopped, the pipe in midair, stunned by his own words.

Chris leaned forward.

“Don’t keep me in suspense, John Ronald. Did a light bulb go on in your head?”

“The first time I saw them I was reading an old poem that I’ve written before the war. It is inspired by these verses from *Christ*. In fact. . .” Ronald went to the desk and retrieved a notebook under a pile of books. He started flipping through it. “Here it is.” He handed it to his friend.

Chris read softly.

Eärendel sprang up from the Ocean’s cup

In the gloom of the mid-world’s rim;

From the door of Night as a ray of light

Leapt over the twilight brim,

And launching his bark like a silver spark

From the golden-fading sand;

Down the sunlit breath of Day’s fiery Death

He sped from Westerland. (“The Voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star” 1-8).[xxi]

Ronald interrupted him with a cough.

“The second time . . . it was at night, I sat here,” pointing to the desk, “I was reading a story and was thinking of all us, yes, of the TCBS. . .I don’t know why, but I clearly thought of these verses.”

Chris closed the notebook and emptied the pipe in the ashtray.

“Thank God we have uncovered a few things. It seems that the ghosts had something to do with a star,” his hand floated towards a hypothetical firmament.

“The morning star, you’ve said? It is Venus, Eros . . .”

“Oh, do not try to push on me Freudian theories,” burst out Ronald. “If we have to find out that it is the fault of my father whom I almost didn’t know, or my mother’s, may she rest in peace. . .”

Chris held his arms with the palms up. “Don’t get angry. As far as I know Freud deals with dreams not hallucinations. What I meant to say is that if our brain sometimes functions in a bizarre way doesn’t mean that there’s no reason for this. Understand? There’s method in madness. Many veterans can confirm it. A sense of guilt, of being lost, neurasthenia . . . We need to find the key.”

Ronald felt his worry resurface. How could he, only an hour ago, underestimate the threat that was looming over his life? He again felt depressed.

“I don’t want to go crazy. I don’t want it and can’t permit it.”

His friend touched his arm.

“I don’t think it will happen. You simply have to find the answer that gives you peace.”

“There’s no question.”

“Yet to me it seems evident,” said Chris with his eyes smiling. “Who is Eärendel?”

Ronald shrugged.

“For the Old Saxons it is a personification of an evening and a morning star. For Christians it symbolized the return of the Saviour.”

“This answer is fine for your students. But I fear that it’s not enough for you.”

Ronald was at the point of answering back, but then he fell silent. Chris did not add anything else. They let themselves be lulled by silence, players concentrated on an invisible chessboard.

The next day they said goodbye at the whistle of the train. Chris spoke again a few words and smiled his more placid smile to reassure Ronald.

“We’re here and they’re not. Don’t underestimate the sense of guilt, it is very common. We ask ourselves what design could be behind all this and we have the whole life to find our answer.”

Ronald squeezed his hand hard.

“Thank you for coming. I’ll write you soon.”

“Make sure that you do it.”

He waited for him to enter the compartment and lower the window. The train whistled again and puffed impatiently.

“Chris?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember the last meeting of the TCBS before I left for Oxford?”

“I’ll never forget it.”

The wheels moved. Ronald walked next to the wagon.

“What did I bring that day?”

The other smiled.

“You didn’t bring anything, old man. That day you came empty-handed and everyone was stunned.” The train accelerated. “God bless you, John Ronald.”

Ronald gave up following in pursuit and remained in the middle of the quay, his hand raised in a sign of farewell.

Lord Dynamite

The Yarmuk Valley, South of Syria, November 1917

The landscape rushes past the window. Wind-beaten mountains, narrow holes in rocks, torrents hurtling towards the river. The Yarmuk stretches sinuously in the valley and crawls under the arches of the railway lines, continuing parallel to them, toward the Jordan River. Two serpents, one of water, the other of iron, courting each other along the way.

The passenger strokes his pitch-black moustaches. He is nervous and cold, he clutches the collar of his coat, while scanning the foggy outline of the Golan Mountains.

The Bloodthirsty One, so called by those from the Caucasus to the Hejaz who fear him. The stories of his cruelty precede the locomotive and announce his mission: to stop the crusaders before they conquer the Holy City. The offensive is massive, he cannot let Von Falkenhayn, with his Teutonic haughtiness, face it in his stead. He must be there, where History is awaiting him. Saladin also was fighting the English. Their king, Richard the Lionheart, did not ever succeed in storming Jerusalem. After eight centuries they are here again, with the same stubbornness, ready to break the bull's horns against the ancient walls. If it were not for their hypocrisy, he would consider them worthy opponents. He wonders what type must Allenby be, the man who commands them. They call him the Bull, because when he points to an object, he pursues it head on until he strikes it. If only war was this, a clash between men of superior intellect and strength, it would be an epic undertaking, a duel of swords between knights. After all, that is the scenario where the Pharaohs, kings, and emperors have fought. Instead, one needs to deal with lazy and unmotivated troops, civilian's hostility, and rats that gnaw at the pillars of the Sublime Porte. One can hear the sound of their teeth, small bites that infect the body of the empire. Vile creatures who seek space for their own brood and survive in herds. Jews, Maronites, Kurds, Greeks, Arabs, Armenians. Many, too many Armenians. They seemed to never end: When the heaps of corpses were taller than a man and would block the horizon, you could still see the rear of the herd slip away.

Perhaps the only thing that differentiates man from beast is the evil intentionality to obtain a better good. In other words, war. The British blather about conducting a clean war, but they lie. They have crushed the revolts in India and of the Boers in South Africa with the determination of a superior race. The British know cruelty as much as he does, know the price to pay to keep the Empire united. That is why they have pretended not see the mountains of corpses, even though the Armenians were Christians like them.

Allenby is a shrewd man. He knows how to use the rats in his own favour. In this the British are masters. One year before the Bedouin Revolt there was a small fire in the south of the Arab peninsula. Then there was the Akaba affair, and today they threaten the whole Hejaz railway. The tribal chiefs are no longer faithful to the Sublime Porte, they accept British money and are now marching and claiming to be a nation. It is always the British who are telling them about it, and the story is so beautiful that it charms them like children. They are very different from the conspirators in the city, who are rather fanciful and talkative. Those he has already hanged in public squares, to get his message across.

The nomads are something else, the desert is the ideal place for the birth of insane ideas. The men who end up in the desert following their own dreams are dangerous fanatics or prophets.

The train enters a tunnel and for a moment, before the lights come up, the compartment is dark long enough for the man to see again the girl who still visits him at night. The same look that once saved her life. Eyes blue green, changing like the seasons. Fair skin and curly hair.

"Tell me who I am, sweet Miriam."

“You are my lord.”

The white arms relax between the sheets, the air is saturated with body odours.

“I’m the master of your destiny. I can have you killed by lifting a finger and you would become just another corpse on top of the heap.”

“When, my lord?”

“One day, when I want it. Now tell me a story. And make it a good story.”

The girl approaches him and speaks in his ear. The voice warm and confident.

“It’s said that a knight is coming fast along the mountain ridge. He is wearing white and no one can see his face, because his eyes dazzle to blindness. He has the power to destroy that which he touches and the gift of being everywhere. Sometimes he’s alone, sometimes he leads a squadron of knights. No one knows where he hides. Now you see him, now you don’t. The desert is his home, the rocks are his food. He is like the air, the wind that blows. One day he crosses the Grand Nefud Desert, the day after he bathes in the Dead Sea. His name flies from one oasis to another. The pilgrims travelling to Mecca see him in the sandstorm and call him *Iblis*, the Devil. Everyone fears him. Even you.”

The man strokes her throat, the caress hinting an imminent squeeze, but the girl looks at him without fear. It is that air of challenge that had excited him from the first moment he saw her, alone and filthy in the midst of the dead, the only survivor of the extermination. He has decided to pick her up and take her with him, to experience a God-like thrill and play with his nemesis.

“I do not fear anyone. I know this story. Your Devil is no other than a British officer, at the head of a horde of ragged Bedouins.”

“He has conquered Akaba.”

The man moves away.

“What do you know about it?”

“All Damascus speaks of it. Rather, whisper, to not anger our lord.”

“You will not be able have yourself killed so easily, sweet Miriam. Not yet.”

Jemal Pasha, military Governor of Syria, Palestine, and Arabia, awakens from his thoughts at the exit from the tunnel. The landscape is more barren and desolate. The railway is the only human trace. The train runs fast, a load of humans and weapons, on that technological wonder that pokes holes in mountains and crosses rivers. The German engineers have designed it for the Sultan, so that he can quickly move the troops from one side of the Empire to another. And the Germans do not make mistakes, methodical calculators of kilometres, tons, men.

The railway is everything, Allenby knows it. That is why he sends his agents to teach the Bedouins how to use explosives to blow it up. That is why the Devil rides on the lips of the beggars, even though he is only a pawn in the clash of titans.

Jemal is afraid of chaos, not men. Dirty air, filled with dust, which in hot windy days joins with the gust from the east and seems to melt even metal. Sand that creeps in everywhere, in houses, under clothes and covers everything, even the vestiges of empires. It is the horror of that flat and indistinct space, out there that makes him nervous, the thought of something that can sweep away a whole city, as it happened to Ur, and Babylon. Better surrender to the English, then. Better make an honourable deal with one's fellow men, rather than give in to the force of emptiness.

The Arabs and their Lord Dynamite, who came from the cold land, are nothing. Lice on the back of a giant: the desert is the real enemy to keep at bay, beyond the bastions of the Holy City and Damascus. The rest is the routine of the war. Count of death, damage, kilometres lost or gained. The venture that he is about to accomplish with the cold dedication for which he is famous.

Another tunnel. Again the darkness swallows the passenger.

"I have to leave. On my return I'll decide what to do with you."

As he slips out of bed and starts to dress, he hears her moving between the sheets.

"Don't you want me to tell you the rest of the story?"

He turns to look at her, distracted.

The small body is wrapped as if in a shroud.

"The end is a foregone conclusion, sweet Miriam. Sooner or later we will take him. And we'll find out that even legends bleed."

The light beyond the glass announces the exit from the tunnel.

25. Barton Street

He knocked twice before attempting to enter. The door was not locked. Just as he crossed the doorstep, Andy was assailed by a foul smell of stale darkness.

“Ned . . . Ned?”

He reached the window, drew the curtains, and opened it, letting the day burst into the study. He laid down the small bag on the table, stopping to observe the chaos on the floor. Rolled up sheets of papers, apple cores, dirty cups. He searched the bathroom, came into the landing. No one. He gave a start when he noticed a hand sticking out from under the cover thrown over the sofa. He raised it cautiously.

“Christ, Ned . . .”

A wheeze with eyes closed.

“Shit, you’ve scared me. You seemed dead.”

He grasped him under the arms to help him sit up and had the exact perception of how light he was. Ned drew back, annoyed, and pulled himself up, pale, his hair ruffled up, his beard unshaven.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been shut up here since Tuesday.”

“Where could I go?” he managed to say before a fit of coughing almost choked him.

Andy shook his head and pointed to the little bag on the table.

“I’ve brought you something to eat.”

“I didn’t ask you.”

Andy shrugged.

“Do what you like. But if you don’t eat you’ll die, seriously.”

Ned stood up, went to the washbasin and poured water over his head. He started drying himself meticulously.

Andy took the opportunity to take another look around. Earlier he did not notice the parcel of papers on the table.

“Have you been writing all night?” He measured the height of the ream of papers passing his hand over it. “You’ve done nothing else, right? I think you have some loose screws.”

Ned did not respond. He went to the window and breathed in the London air.

“What day is it?”

“Friday.”

He sat down again on the sofa and looked around as if he did not recognize the place.

“Have you brought the newspaper too” he asked, distracted.

“In the bag. But it’s yesterday’s”

Andy saw him take the newspaper out of the envelope and spread it on the desk. For a few minutes the bright eyes skimmed from one line to the other. The paper cushioned the noise of the fist on the table.

“Bastards.”

As he was reaching the window, Andy peeped at the paper. On the first page there was the photograph of an Arab with a dark beard. The caption identified him as Prince Feisal.

“Do you know him?”

Ned answered without turning.

“Yes.”

Andy browsed through the article. During his long trips to the city he often used to read newspapers left on park benches. The news did not interest him much, he could not find anything related to his wretched existence. But it was a way of killing the time between clients.

“It seems that he’s doing rather badly.”

Ned let himself fall on the chair.

“It’s my fault.”

Andy did not understand what he referred to, but he did not ask.

He found himself on the receiving end of a grim stare, as blue as the deep sea.

“When you were in France, did you betray someone?”

Andy shook his head.

“A lot can be said about me, but I’ve done my duty over there. Nobody had to complain about me. One time I even saved the life of a non-commissioned officer.”

Ned nodded.

“So you don’t know what it means.” He laid a hand on the manuscript. “All the ink in the world cannot absolve me.”

He had reappeared suddenly about a month before. When he bumped into him, Andy took a few seconds to recognize him, but he had not forgotten him. Now he was well known. The show was still running, they moved it to the Royal Albert Hall, even His Majesty, it was said, had organized a private performance for the royal family. Everyone knew who Colonel Lawrence was by now.

He had asked him nothing but to visit him at the Barton Street studio, the same place where he had brought him the first time they met.

He was not like the others; he had no interest in sex. He had given him money to do his grocery shopping and supply him with paper and ink. Andy had not asked questions, would come to him every three days with the provisions and would always find him at the desk, sometimes asleep on the sheets of paper, pen in hand. He would end up putting him to bed and closing the door behind him. When he was writing, he seemed possessed, in the grip of a different person, much stronger and determined, compelling him to never stop, until he was at the end of the tether, until he would collapse. Andy had seen the manuscript grow bigger bit by bit, while Ned was wasting away gradually as if he were squeezing his vital energy onto the page, as if the ink were his own blood.

That evening Ned convinced him to go out. They walked silently until Millbank and then entered Whitehall Street, the district of the British government buildings, popping out in Trafalgar Square. The city was enveloped with a gloomy aura, even the lights were a little sinister. Andy knew every street like the back of his hand, but he realised that he was afraid. What if someone recognized Colonel Lawrence? What if the Bobbies caught them? Ned was mad to go with him in popular places. It was clear that he did not care, and this is really what scared Andy. In the trenches you would understand it immediately when one was going out of his mind, because he would lose the sense of danger and start doing crazy things. Many of those whom he had seen get the Military Cross by acts of courage were such types, nitwits that threw themselves screaming against a nest of machine guns. They were screams of orgasms, Andy knew it. He was convinced that some of them came in their pants while they were launching bombs by hand against a German trench or inserting a bayonet in the stomach of a Boche.[xxii]

On the way back, Andy saw Ned become increasingly sullen. To pick himself up, Andy took a few long swigs from the flask he was carrying in his pocket. He accompanied him to the stairs and he stopped in the doorway, but Ned asked him to come in.

“Don’t turn on the light, please.”

The rays entering from the windows were hardly sufficient to light up the corners of the room.

Andy heard him messing about inside the trunk. He stiffened, his heartbeat suddenly racing, wondering what would happen.

"You've got to do one thing for me."

"It's too late, I'd like to go to bed."

Ned came out of the dark.

"I'll pay you."

From the box he took a few bills and gave them to him.

Andy looked at him, undecided.

"Tonight I'm not in the mood."

"It's not what you think. The first time we met you told me about your stepfather, remember? Have you ever thought of doing to him what he had done to you?"

Now Andy had a great urge to leave, but that was a lot of money and the temptation was strong.

"I have thought of killing him, that bastard."

Ned came close, and Andy saw the object that he was holding in his hand. It was a long, thin stick, similar to a riding crop. He placed it on the table near him and started to unbutton his shirt, and then his trousers. He took off his clothes, standing naked, one hand covering his genitals.

Andy's thoughts raced through his mind till they stopped.

"Why?"

"I deserve the same hate. I've betrayed my companions, the people I loved. I haven't saved anyone." His face was frightening. "I must be punished."

Andy tried to drive away the idea, shaking his head hard.

"You're crazy," he managed to hiss.

Sucking the prick of the depraved who are lured to Covent Garden was nothing compared to this thing . . . this insane thing. He tried to speak, to tell him how much he despised him, but he recognized he could not. So he spat on him.

He did not react.

"I'll give you more money. Double," the voice toneless.

Andy grasped the stick. He felt the sweat between his fingers. His heart was beating a million times faster now, and by God, the anger he was feeling was taking the form of a clear blasphemy, that he wanted to scream in his face, and then hit him, and make him see it.

Ned turned.

“Do it now.”

Andy moved, and in that moment the light from the outside hit the thin, pale body in front of him.

The hair on his arms stood on end. He opened his eyes wide.

“Holy Christ. . . Oh, Christ.”

He let the riding crop fall and ran outside, down the stairs, into the street, towards the river, over the bridge, to the opposite end of the city, to the edge of the world.

26. Return

From that height the scene was uplifting. The gaze could range around the city and wander up all the way to the horizon. Before him was the towering campanile of St. Mary, overshadowing the square. On the other sides, the forest of spires and chimneys of All Souls, Lincoln, and the Bodleian Library encircled the grand cupola of Radcliffe Camera.

He had climbed up there to relax his mind. Now that the season was turning beautiful, being shut up all afternoon in the big lecture hall made him feel oppressed and out of breath. Traces of neurasthenia not be underestimated. Going back home after class, not even talking about it. Since the birth of David, the house was no longer a place where he could study. The colic of the newborn and the jealousy of Jenny were a lethal mixture for his nerves. The newly arrived would use his lungs tirelessly, and the signs of his sister’s nervousness were growing stronger. The first time the little girl had seen Nancy nursing the newborn, she burst out with a string of screams that pushed him into the bathroom with his hands on his ears. The night before she had held them hostage until she was readmitted into their bedroom, where she could watch over the usurper's feedings. At the first light of dawn, Robert had dressed without making a noise and headed to the city.

What was disturbing him the most was that in the chaos following the birth he had not yet made time to bond with his son. Between Nancy's anxiety, the caring presence of the babysitter, and the scenes with Jenny, he could hardly manage to get glimpse of him when he would come home in the evening. He was ready to promise that he would be a nice chap, he had thought of it since they had placed him in his arms, just cleaned from blood and amniotic liquid.

For the moment, however, he could only follow his instinct to escape from the domestic harem, leaving the child as a pawn for his own absence.

It was harder to escape nightmares.

He had again dreamt of the labyrinth. This time, though, it was way too similar to the trenches of La Bassée, attacked with gas, and he crawling inside trying to find a glimmer of light and air. In his ears his sinister breathing through the filter of the mask and the pressing sensation of a very imminent danger.

The sky was getting clearer and clearer. He drove away those thoughts concentrating on the panorama, beyond Big Tom and the meadows of Christ Church, where the city met the Thames. That water was going to London and thought could not help but follow it, in the footsteps of those who had left him in the storm, carrying away with them their own mysteries.

In the only letter that he had written him, T. E. had said he needed solitude to finish his book. As if London was not also more worldly and crowded than Oxford. But certainly in the capital it was easier to disappear.

In the last weeks the newspapers did nothing but speak about the conflicts in the Middle East, confirming every darker prediction. The French had called for ante-bellum agreements with the allies and they had decided to claim their right over Syria. The veil of falsehood had fallen, Lloyd George could no longer delay and had removed the aegis over Damascus, allowing the French troops to occupy the city and install a protectorate. The Syrians had resisted, a bloodbath ensued. The departure of Prince Feisal had been quick enough to be called an escape.

Robert was trying to imagine how T. E. would feel about those events. Feisal pushed back into the desert, the inhabitants abandoned and left at the mercy of the French, the Arab independence crushed by the reason of state.

All of a sudden he caught a movement of ants in the Quadrangle, together with alarmed shouting. From the windows of their dormitory rooms, students leaned out risking falling. Someone pointed upwards. Robert turned to look at the spires of All Souls, and only then did he notice that the coat of arms of the college was not fluttering on the top of the lower tower. In place of the formation with three red flowers on a yellow field, there was a red rectangle that he seemed to recognize.

He did not hold back a laugh of enthusiasm.

Only one person in the world could climb up on these roofs to hoist the banner of the Hejaz.

He found him seated on the carpets, busy reading the back post in the middle of a pile of opened envelopes and pages from newspapers. His face was that of a convalescent on the way to recovery.

He welcomed him warmly, asked about little David and the family, and offered him the usual mug of beer, and biscuits that he had received from an admirer.

Robert pointed to the empty spot on the wall where the banner of the Sherif of Mecca usually stood out.

"A *rentrée* in a grand style."

"It wasn't myself that I wanted to announce."

T. E. grabbed the bell from the shelf and rattled it out of the window.

"You'll wake up the whole college."

"They need to wake up. It is about time that they realised that out of here the world is falling apart."

Robert nodded.

"I've read the newspapers."

The bell returned to its place. T. E. spoke from the base of the fireplace.

"Believe me, it's nothing yet. I've sent a couple of letters that they can't not publish." He cast a look at the portrait of Feisal. "I want it known how Britain treats its allies. The words that we've used in the war are worthless, but for the Arabs to give one's word is everything. Syria is only the beginning, the whole area will explode like a powder keg. We're governed by deaf and blind people. They have such a fear of the Bolshevik plague in Europe that they don't notice that Russia is also an Asian country. That revolution is a lesson for all the people of the continent, a demonstration that the wretched and the unrefined can conquer power. And we? We always administer the old, odious English medicine: the lead."

Robert went on guard.

"Welcome back to the ring, old man."

He made as if to clasp him in a boxer's embrace, but he saw him stiffen with a hostile expression and quickly gave up the joke. In that moment he realised that they have never touched, except for the first handshake. But certainly the phobia of physical contact was not the strangest pathology one could find among veterans.

"What happened in London?"

T. E. stepped down from the pedestal and sprawled on the armchair, one leg dangling from the side of the chair, the hands clasped at the stomach.

“I’ve hit bottom, I think. And I’ve learnt that it didn’t make sense. We need to climb back up.” He made a gesture of climbing. “They have made me an accomplice of a deception, but I can still make enough noise to shake a few seats.”

“Who if not Lawrence of Mecca. . .”

“I’ve finished my book.”

“This is big news.”

“It’s only a draft, there’s still much work to be done. I don’t know yet if I’ll publish it.”

Robert pulled out the paper from the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Well, here is your epigraph. I think that it can be very incisive.”

T. E. took it and placed it on the table without looking at it.

“Thanks.”

Robert looked at his watch, trying to ignore his own embarrassment.

“It’s better to be at home for dinner.” He stood up as did T. E., but he stood still, undecided whether to speak. When he was on the doorstep he decided to ask him.

“Who is S. A.?”

T. E. did not react, as if he expected the question and did not give it much weight.

“A person who paid a disproportionate price for the Arab adventure.” A bitter smile. “Another burden on my conscience.”

Robert realised that it was not the evasive response that irritated him, but the blatant self-centeredness. They had been a part of a system too big and complex to be reduced to a personal responsibility. Once he had tried to explain it even to Siegfried, but without tangible results.

“You’re wrong to take up the cross. We all were victims and accomplices.”

T. E. leaned against the doorframe, touching it with his cheek.

“I don’t want absolution. I just want to return a few jabs. It won’t be easy.” The eyes laughed. “After all my specialty is not the pen, but dynamite.”

Lord Dynamite

The Yarmuk Valley, South of Syria, November, 1917

The dragon charges out of the mountain with a puff of scorching breath. His armour, still wet with rain, glitters in the morning light and reflects the sparkles of the river. He runs parallel to the stream without slowing down, in order to cross it further west, where the plain narrows under the grassy hump of Jabal ad-Duruz. It is enormous and majestic: twelve wagons, drawn by two locomotives at maximum strength. They transport the precious load to Jerusalem. In the distance the thunder carried by the wind sounds like cannon shots fired on Gaza and Beersheeba. In retaliation the dragon launches a shrill scream, of attack, as if his passage must cut the world in two. He steers along the curve and plunges into a descent towards the bridge.

When the train exits the tunnel, Jemal Pasha squints, blinded by the reflection of the sky. He squeezes into his uniform coat, on which silver stars blaze. In the great hall-on-wheels it is very cold, and for a moment he envies the soldiers, huddled into the wagons. Outside the window, the Yarmuk approaches the train again and flows under the brick arches of a bridge. The locomotive runs towards the river to cross it and leave it under its wheels.

The man wrapped in the ragged mantle watches the dragon coming nearer and nearer. He cannot help but admire the aerodynamic beauty of the steam engines and their power.

Come on, come on.

If it were a painting, he thinks, I would have a spear.

If it were a legend, I would have a sling or a sharp pole.

The first wheel hits the bridge.

Instead, I have only this leverage and this trigger.

Now.

The land explodes in a deafening roar, the air rips it away, throwing him a few metres farther. Seconds pass and the first thing that he notices through the smoke is the charred trunk of a man, the driver engineer perhaps. Then his own arms, scratched and bloody. Between his legs

the smashed detonator. Finally the train, inert, the locomotives overturned in the river, the wagons derailed. Resounding around the shots from the attack.

The shots filter through the humming in his ear drums. An unmistakable sound of gallops, accompanied by horses' neighs. My horses, thinks Jemal. He is as if in a dream, without any memory of the preceding minutes, in the middle of a battle that he cannot see, except in the form of shadows that flash past over his head, across the lit rectangle of the window. Only later, when a droplet of blood will cover his face, will he notice the wound on his forehead, a little more than a scratch to plug. He will also find a bruise under a tear in his uniform and feel an annoying pain in his knee, but not before managing to stand on the cracked window glass, understanding that the carriage is overturned on its side. Someone, perhaps an officer, appears from above to shout at him not to get out. Holding tight to the overturned seats, Jemal reaches the door of the wagon and opens it wide with a push of his shoulder that leaves him breathless. Instinctively, he draws his revolver and comes out.

They shoot from the heights, long shots. The soldiers respond to the fire in the wagon. A platoon of camel riders are dragging horses out of the cattle wagon, taking advantage of the shooting. He sees them going away with the booty towards the hills. A little farther away, he recognizes the fat silhouette of Shukair, his personal imam, running awkwardly close to the train, his eyes wide open with panic. He seems to slip, but rather the bullets are knocking him off balance. He is an easy target, they continue to hit him even when he tries to go forward crawling, grunting like a pig, until he rolls down the embankment.

Jemal scans the hills. Damn lunatics, they are not more than fifty. His soldiers are four hundred. There is only one order to give: counter attack.

He cannot run, his feet hurt, he feels the bullets grazing him, ricocheting on the rocks, and the cries of Ali to go up, not to stop. He cannot do it, he squats behind a rock, taking deep breaths.

"Run, Urens! Come away!"

He makes a sign to Ali to go on and turns to look again at the carcass of the dragon.

"They're coming! Run, Urens!"

With a titanic effort, he stands up again.

"Oh, I wish that all this never happened," he said in English, and he repeats it to mark every step and exploit all the strength of despair.

Sometimes he casts a look behind him to check for followers. After the first surprise, the Turks have closed ranks and have come out to drive them away. He sees them at the foothills, clean uniforms, effective weapons, good shots. An elite unit. It was not supposed to go this way. He trips, falls, almost a blessing.

Leave me here.

It is over.

But no. He sees Ali and his men plunge down shooting like madmen. The Turks shoot at least six before they can reach him and drag him away.

“Have you seen the wagon with the flags?!”

The wild face of Ali is tense because of the climb. He does not respond.

“Inside there is a general from the High State. There are insignia of the IV Army Corp.”

Ali pulls him by the sleeve.

“Let’s go, Urens, there’s no time.”

“He’s Jemal Pasha!”

“If it’s true they’ll chase us to hell.”

Auda waits for them further up, with the Howeitat and the rest of Beni Sakhr who shoot to cover the retreat. The fire barrier blocks the Turks halfway down the slope.

The old leader grasps the Englishman’s hand and helps him climb.

“Are you wounded, Urens?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere, I think.”

“You have no time to die, we have to go away from here.”

“Wait, I must have a broken foot. Let me rest one moment.”

The look of the old raider is a lightning bolt of anger.

“God is great, but do not ask too much of His Benevolence.”

He pushes him up with all his strength, towards the rest of the steps to the top.

No one can see his face, because his eyes dazzle to blindness.

Jemal touches his temple and looks at his bloody fingers as if the blood does not belong to him.

He chases away the attendants who would like to help him and moves along side of the train, to observe the ridge better, where his soldiers have scared the Bedouins away.

Sometimes he is alone, sometimes he leads a squadron of knights. Now you see him, now you don't.

The wind that rises provokes a burst of chills in him. It is sandy air that comes from faraway, the East, covering the contorted mass of the train, infecting wounds.

Everyone fears him. Even you.

Someone carries a field chair for him and Jemal sits down, his mind jammed by the emptiness. Only one thought comes through. He will miss the appointment with Allenby.

The beasts gallop away under the lashes of the whip. Nobody turns around, worried only about finding the protection of the desert. The escape ends when the landscape changes and the dromedaries, exhausted, refuse to continue.

Then you can dismount and find out if you are still alive, search for wounds under the clothes.

The Englishman counts five on his body. All grazing shots.

"You're very lucky, Urens."

Ali gives him a smelly bag.

"What's this?"

"Camel urine. Pour it over the wounds. It stops the infection."

The Englishman does what he is told with a grimace of disgust and pain.

"They'll smell us miles away."

Ali sneers.

"They'll have time to prepare the celebrations." Then he becomes serious, comes near and touches his arm. "Today you have made the earth tremble up to Constantinople. Everyone will know it. From now on you have to have eyes on the back of your head too."

Auda is already urging everyone to resume the march. One at a time they mount in the saddle and head towards the desert. The Englishman goes last, giving himself time to see them parading with the sun behind them. The white robes, the dark faces, with black curls that come down from their headdresses. No parade will ever instill in them the pride and compassion of that moment. He would like to photograph them, but he has not brought the camera with him. He would like, if only for the closing of that pitched battle, to be really one of them.

27. Vaughan

When they exited the pub, Jack noticed that Warnie was staggering. He looked around, glad that it was late and that his brother was in street clothes. He held him up and led him towards his hotel. The few times that his brother would take the opportunity of a leave to come to visit him, he would never accept his hospitality. He did not want to have anything to do with Mrs. Moore, for him that woman did not exist. Jack accepted this arrangement and never spoke about it, even though he was suspecting that it was not only the inconvenience of that relationship that affected Warnie.

The fact was that that situation had pulled them far apart. Since their mother's death it had never happened. It was always the two of them, children, boys, soldiers. Jack was convinced that Warnie felt betrayed and that this exacerbated his misogyny. While they were prancing along the pavement, smelling his brother's alcoholic breath on his face, he thought that they managed to stay together without rancour, in spite of the burden of the unsaid. On the other hand, Warnie had to drink a lot to maintain self-control. It was nothing new. Usually it never got so bad that he would not find the way home, but from time to time he would need guiding. Jack offered to accompany him up to his room, but he refused, grumbling only good night and postponing any further discussion till the next morning.

Jack stayed on the threshold to see him going up the stairs, to be reassured that he does not tumble down just as he looked away. He could not but feel sorrow for him, and slight guilt, and think that everything could have been different.

He consoled himself with the idea that their bond would not ever be broken and thinking again of the afternoons spent together in the attic, rummaging in the trunk where old volumes eaten by mites were hiding. Books narrating adventure stories of magicians and knights, which had become the pivot of these secret expeditions at the top of the stairs. Hidden up there, they felt themselves to be explorers of an enchanted realm, captivated by a pleasure that only children can experience. And it was also here that they had taken refuge the day their mother died.

Jack started to walk. It was a beautiful night and he was not at all sleepy. He went back through the streets of the town centre. Under the misty lamplights, the massive shapes of the Bodleian Library and the Radcliffe Camera were sleeping giants. He chose to pass under the Bridge of Sighs, that corner of Venice reproduced for the pleasure of the neoclassicists. He was assailed by shouts and laughter from the almost invisible alley to his left. It was Saturday night, The Turf had to be packed with students. He turned into the narrow passage, wide enough for one person, and followed it through, popping out in the small court. From the open windows of the pub, supported by the old wall, a yellow light was shining, inviting one to enter. He did so and found himself under a low ceiling, among tables full of mugs, surrounded by merry people.

He ordered a beer at the counter and started sipping it, turned towards the hall, searching for a familiar face. He was hoping to meet Darsey and apologize. After the last discussion they remained on formal terms with each other. Alcohol could favour a reconciliation. He did not care about Moran, on the other hand; he had decided to pretend that he did not exist. Up to now, his apparition on Warneford Road had not had consequences. If he wanted to spy on his double life, report him to the Council of the Institute, blackmail him—he could go ahead. He would not give him satisfaction.

At that moment he noticed Barfield and others making signs to him from the end of the room. While he was coming to join them, he recognized Harwood, an old friend of Barfield, with whom he had shared the Classics examination. A prim boy, with the typical snobbery of those at Christ Church. There was also Leo Baker, a drama enthusiast, Jack's age, who was a roommate of Barfield at Wadham. Finally, James Vaughan, with the same negligent air as when he had met him in Mrs. Moore's garden.

"Come on, Jack, join the festivities," said Barfield. "Today James has sold a painting."

They clinked the mugs together.

"Congratulations."

"A meeting of artists," said Barfield. "A painter," he raised the glass to Vaughan. "An actor," it was Baker's turn. "And a poet," to Jack, who twisted his mouth as if his friend was making fun of him.

The friendly expression of Vaughan made him look older. "So is it true that you have published a collection of poems?"

"Under an alias," answered Jack. "The critics have not paid me any attention."

“Don’t get mad. My first exhibition was put down by all critics. Never been so unanimous.”

“And later?” asked Harwood.

“They still all agree,” joked Baker.

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Vaughan happily. “When I’ll paint Lawrence of Arabia they’ll have to come and kiss my feet.”

Barfield went to the counter to order a second round for all. Baker and Harwood stood up to help him carry the mugs.

“Why do you care so much to make him a portrait?” asked Jack.

“Those who have made it so far have missed the mark.”

Jack listened attentively.

“Take Augustus John,” continued Vaughan. “He has painted a seraphic Arab prince with blue eyes. That is not a portrait, it’s a monument. It’s missing only a horse. Rather a camel.” He laughed alone. “Not to speak of Chase’s photograph for Lowell Thomas’s show. Laughable.”

Jack realised that he was unusually interested in the topic.

“How would you paint him?”

“Menacing, perhaps. The portrait of our dark side.”

“I don’t think that you would have much success.”

“Oh, not right away. But when the truth will surface . . .”

The beer arrived. Another toast, then a burst of laughter behind them forced them to be quiet for a few seconds and frustrated Jack’s curiosity. The other three were immersed in a discussion of Shakespeare started at the counter.

“Have you read what he has published in newspapers?” asked Vaughan.

“Yes,” Jack lied.

“Now he blames the government for what happened in the Middle East, but if there’s someone who deceived the Arabs it is he. He’s trying to save his conscience and reputation.”

Jack sensed a new excitement, as if the tension of those months had found a path to channel itself.

“I don’t follow politics. How can you say that he lies?”

“Oh, I certainly don’t have the evidence. But I know who he is. And I know who has trained him to do what he’s done. Do you know Professor Hogarth?”

“Director of the Ashmolean.”

“Sure. But he’s also one of the most important consuls in the Foreign Office of the Middle East. He was a student of Evans in Crete, he speaks six languages, knows the Mediterranean well, and has travelled in Moslem countries. It’s he who recruited Lawrence when he was a student. He made him learn Arabic, sent him to Syria, taught him what he needed to know. I was here, I have seen those two become father and son.”

“Recruited?”

“Have you ever heard of The Round Table? Not Arthur, Lancelot and company. I mean a society founded by Lord Milner and inspired by the ideas of Sir Cecil Rhodes. There are within it several bigwigs. Politicians, ministers, directors of newspapers, academics.”

Jack shook his head.

“They write in a magazine that bears the name of the society. The director is Lionel Curtis, ex-student here at Oxford and still *fellow* of All Souls. Does it tell you anything?”

Jack’s skin crawled.

Vaughan continued.

“Some years ago Curtis published a really illuminating book, *The Commonwealth of Nations*. I recommend it.”

“Who are they? What does Lawrence have to do with it?”

“They’re my father’s heroes. People who find themselves in key places, and not by chance, instructed to direct the empire from the inside, without going through Parliament. Hogarth is one of them. I wonder what Lenin would think of this kind of imperialists.”

“I care nothing about Lenin, you haven’t answered.”

At that moment Leo Baker proposed a third round and the merry chattiness of Barfield was directed towards them.

Vaughan shrugged: “Read the book,” he whispered.

When they went out of the pub they all said goodbye to each other and shook hands. Jack would have liked to ask Vaughan to take a short walk with him, but his flat was in Summertown.

So he walked alone, through the deserted streets. The fresh air would clear his mind. Forebodings were taking the form of a revelation, a ray of light in the middle of a fog. Lawrence was the embodiment of postwar hypocrisy, all that could be hated of that period. It was incredible that poets like Sassoon and Graves had not noticed. Worse: it was shameful.

When he entered his room he found Darsey snoring loudly. He undressed in the dark not to wake him up and hoped he would sleep quickly. The next morning he had to get up early to accompany Warnie to the station.

Lord Dynamite

Jerusalem, January 1918

Christian Street. A kaleidoscope of races and humans along the way to the door of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Russian Hebrews with curls that come down from skull caps; Greek-Orthodox priests with black hair and beard that touch the stomach; old Arab nomads of the desert, living portraits of biblical prophets; Turkish shopkeepers with fez and knickerbockers; Arab merchants with false smiles at the entrance of shops.

Jerusalem. Crossroads between East and West. Smell of spices, filth, a variety of humanity. Rumours spread quickly, legends that lead far, to the desert.

After the breaching of the front at Gaza and Beersheba, the British entered the city without firing a shot. The tactical masterpiece of Allenby.

An interesting detail: no British banner in sight. Not even on top of the governor's palace.

The appointment is at ten o'clock in the morning. There is enough time to see the bazaar.

"Thanks for receiving me, Colonel Storrs."

"Please sit down, Mr. Thomas. Unfortunately, General Allenby is very busy and won't be here soon."

While sitting down, the American takes the opportunity to study the man in front of him. A refined bearing, elegant even in the khaki uniform; cheeks hollow and orderly moustaches. English courtesy. The new military Governor of Jerusalem.

"I promise to steal as little time as possible."

"We can only be grateful for that. If I understand correctly you're here to inform your people about what we're doing in the Middle East."

With an instinctive gesture the American takes out pen and paper.

"Let's just say that my newspaper would like to clarify to the readers why it's worth the effort to fight the war on the side of Great Britain and France. We're looking for something that goes beyond dry political reasons, you know what I mean? At the beginning I was directed to the French front, but, frankly, I haven't found interesting material."

Storrs stares at him stiffly.

"I understand the trenches aren't very endearing."

“Not for what I have in mind, actually.”

Well yes, I'm a Yankee, the American thinks, while smiling obligingly.

“What do you like to know?”

“I’ve heard about the fight for Arab independence. Then this morning, in the bazaar, I came across a curious story. Regarding a certain Major Lawrence. In the city everyone talks about him.”

“Ah.” Storrs strokes his moustaches. “And what do they say?”

“That he’s leading an army of Bedouins and is fighting against the Turks. That he is a magician with dynamite and has become a kind of hero.”

The military man stands up and reaches a side door. When he flings it wide open, the American jumps to his feet.

A man is seated at a big table. He is dressed in a traditional garment, as white as snow. Together with a pistol he carries in his belt a curved dagger, its hilt and holster inlaid with gold. When he lifts his eyes from a thick book, the journalist notices that they are of an intense blue.

Storrs assumes an amused tone.

“Mr. Thomas, may I introduce Major Lawrence, the Uncrowned King of Arabia.”

The American comes forward with a stretched hand.

“This is Mr. Lowell Thomas of the *Chicago Evening Journal*. He would like to make you known to the Americans.”

A timid handshake.

“Very glad, Major.”

Storrs takes the opportunity to take his leave and get to his own work.

The Englishman invites him to sit down, with an affected gesture.

The journalist takes his time, incredulous at what he sees. He would like to burst into a laugh: it is pure cinema, exactly what he was looking for. His eyes fall on the book: it is about the ruins of Petra.

“In war there is also time for archeology?”

“An old passion.”

The American takes out a pack from his jacket.

“Cigarette?”

“Thanks, I don’t smoke.” The Englishman clicks open a silver lighter. “Allow me, please.”

The spirals climb towards the ceiling.

“Do you keep it to light fuses?”

He does not seem to catch the irony.

“Truthfully, we use electric detonators.” He looks at the object in his hand. “I think it belongs to Von Falkenhayn. This was his headquarters.” An indulgent smile. “In the hurry of relocating he probably has forgotten it here.”

“Falkenhayn?”Lowell Thomas looks around, while he reopens his notebook.

“Was it in this room that he devised the defence of Palestine on account of the Turks?”

“Precisely.”

“Can I write, then, that you have commandeered your adversary’s lighter?”

“Oh, nothing of the sort. I intend to return it to him, if he’ll do us the courtesy of waiting on us in Damascus, when we’ll arrive.”

“Good answer. Will you allow me a short interview?”

“I thought you had already started.”

Lowell Thomas sighs with satisfaction.

“Are you a member of the Allenby General Staff?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of him?”

“He’s a military genius. He’ll win this war.”

The pen slides rapidly over the page.

“And you? What is your role in the company?”

“I take care of trains.”

“For being almost a legend you’re very modest. I’ve heard that you have blown up into the air the train of the Turkish governor.”

“It’s been by chance. We had failed with the first two convoys, the fuse was defective. If we had known that the train was full of soldiers, we would’ve never attacked it. We’ve lost too many men in that assault.”

“How many trains have you blown up so far?”

“More than twenty.”

The American shakes his head ecstatically, without stopping writing.

“If I had to tell the readers of my newspaper, who is Major Lawrence?”

“An archeologist loaned to the war.”

“Satisfy my curiosity. What did you do with your uniform? Are these clothes a way of getting the sympathy of the local population?”

“In a certain sense, Mr. Thomas, this is a uniform. This dagger, this *agal*, and the ring say that I am at the service of King Hussein of Mecca and his son Feisal, our Arab allies, and that I enjoy their benevolence.”

“Fantastic. Speak about them to me. What are they fighting for?”

“For one Arab nation. A home where all the Arabs can live free and in peace.”

The American looks up.

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

The journalist scratches his head.

“You might’ve heard of the Sykes-Picot treaty. The Bolsheviks have made it public quickly after the coup d’état? A good joker this Lenin.”

“I know about it as much as you.”

“Lebanon and Syria to the French, Palestine and Mesopotamia to the English, the Caucasus to the Russians. Where are the Arabs mentioned?”

Lowell Thomas notices that he is silent. He thinks that he is searching for an answer, although he does not give signs of nervousness, rather he seems to value the frankness of the question. He has a regal posture, as if he carries a burden . . . A crown, yes. He answers without losing his composure.

“Apparently that treaty has been sealed before the Revolt broke out. And before we decided to request Feisal’s help to defeat the Turks.”

“Are you saying that for you it has no value?”

“I’m saying that in war things change.”

The journalist closes his notebook and places it over the pen. No more smiles.

“I’ll not write this, it’s a personal curiosity. How did your Arab friends take the news?”

“They wanted to stop fighting.”

“And did you convince them against it?”

“Yes.”

“You must have good logic.”

“They don’t have an alternative. If they would retreat now, they would be set aside forever. If they want to hope to obtain that which is due to them, they have to fight till the end.”

Lowell Thomas nods.

“An exemplary argument. I’d like to take photographs. I have with me a cameraman, I’d also like to shoot you in action.”

“We move a lot. It’s difficult to keep up with us.”

“I won’t give you any problem, I promise you.”

“I thought that you’d like to give an account of Allenby’s attack, not the Arab Revolt.”

A friendly smile spreads across the American’s face.

“I thought they were the same thing.”

The Englishman also smiles, now, while he stands up and takes his leave.

“We will leave in a few days. We go to meet Feisal in his headquarters at Akaba. You have the time to change your mind.”

Lowell Thomas remains alone in the room and moves to the window to see him going out to the street. A group of Bedouins, waiting for him on foot, swarm around him. They follow him and at the same time they protect him, looking sternly at anyone who crosses his path. Dark faces, bandoliers, pistols and scimitars on their hips. The men of the desert. The story that he was looking for. He sits down and resumes writing until a noise of heels stepping at a marching pace makes him jump up.

The Bull arrives like a gust of wind, a vortex that sucks up the air. The American has to rein in his instinct to spring up to attention.

“Good morning, Mr. Thomas. And welcome to Jerusalem.” Allenby throws his hat on the table and extends a powerful handshake. “I’m afraid that I can give you only a few minutes.”

“It’ll be enough, General.”

The Head Commander does not sit down. He leans against the table, just crossing his boots, his arms folded, but he makes a sign to the journalist to make himself comfortable.

While holding the tools of the trade, Lowell Thomas thinks that he is exactly how he imagined him. Square jaw, grey eyes, pointed moustaches like bayonets. A masterpiece of martial aesthetics.

“To begin with, congratulation. In the annals of history there aren’t many who have stormed the Holy City and liberated it.”

“I have to correct you, Mr. Thomas. I haven’t stormed it, I’ve liberated it.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve had the privilege of filming your triumphal entry. You entered on foot, without flags and banners.”

“You see, when Kaiser Wilhelm came here to visit, he paraded on horseback in the streets together with his royal guards. In these parts it is considered a gesture of conquest, of dominion. The Germans will never understand these people.”

“You, on the other hand, do. What is the secret?”

“I want to do it.”

The pages are filling with hieroglyphics.

“The American Jews are very interested in the proclamation of the British Governor who has defined Palestine.” The journalist flips through the notebook looking for a previous point, “a hearth for the Jewish people.” “It means that you would support the Zionist project?”

Allenby raises his hand.

“Mine is a military administration, Mr. Thomas. For me politics is only a contingent necessity. If you want an answer to your question you have to go to London and directly address Lord Balfour.”

“So it’s accidental that the head of your Secret Service is a Zionist Jew.”

Allenby does not change his expression.

“Colonel Meinertzhagen is an officer of His Majesty. An *excellent* officer. That's enough.”

The American bows his head, yielding.

“All right. A little while ago I met Major Lawrence. A unique character. Perhaps you can tell me something about him.”

“The best fighter under my command. And the worst soldier.”

“In fact, from his appearance one couldn’t even tell he’s a military man.”

The general gave him an ineffable look.

“If you refer to his disguise. I’m not a formalist, I evaluate based on the results.”

“Therefore, the *mise en scène* works?”

“You be the judge. Eighteen months ago the Arabs were retreating before Medina. Now I have three thousand irregulars who guard the entire line of the Jordan.”

“Surprising. Is it true that the Turks have placed a reward on his head?”

“It appears so. He was lucky that when they caught him they didn’t recognize him.”

The American freezes.

“He was captured by the Turks? When?”

The general drags his words, as if he said something indecent, then he drops them one at a time in a low tone. “Last month while he was on patrol in Deraa, in the North. I think they mistook him for a Caucasian deserter, many of whom have blond hair and blue eyes. They must not have treated him with kid gloves, the Turks never do that. Due to their ignorance, they let him go. But it’s useless to ask him about the episode, he won’t say anything.” The General approaches the window and looks at the city as if to make sure that nothing disturbs his conquest. For a moment it is as if he is talking to himself. “There are sides of that man that I’ve given up understanding, and I think it’s right this way. I’m not a philosopher, Mr. Thomas, I’m a soldier.”

The American resumes writing.

“I understand. What will Lawrence do now?”

Allenby turns to the table.

“He’ll do what he wants, as usual. And it’s exactly what we need. He’ll spark off the men of Feisal against the railway stations between here and Damascus and engage the IV Turkish Army Corp, keeping it far from my right wing while I advance north.”

“You seem to trust the Arabs a lot.”

“You see, luckily the Arabs are not my concern and for this I must thank Major Lawrence. I have to deal with the bulk of the Turkish-German contingent, which is still between us and Damascus and won’t make life easy.” He looks at his wrist watch, picks up his hat and slips it under his arm. “Now, unfortunately, I’m obliged to leave you. Are you planning to follow our advance?”

“I’d like to document it, yes.”

“Very well. Goodbye, then.”

He goes away quickly as he arrived, his steps resounding in the corridor.

Lowell Thomas looks around undecided what to do. Then he sits down again and lights another cigarette. Calmly, he skims over his notes, to the first blank page. He writes in capital letters.

Lawrence of the Arabs . . .

The Prince of Mecca . . .

English efficiency must have fixed the telegraph. The piece can be ready the same evening.

Lord Dynamite . . .

What time will it be in Chicago?

Lawrence of Arabia.

28. Essay Club

I wish we were happy, Ronald.

The voice of Edith was in his mind along the street, as he was passing near the tombstones of St. Mary Magdalen, distorted and covered with moss. He did not have to rush, they were not expecting him before half an hour, and he could allow himself to walk in the streets that he preferred, like a visitor who happened to be there for the first time. He had become devoted to Oxford, the idea of leaving it did not appeal to him. However, the opportunity that they had offered him would not come again.

The journey north had been a harbinger of new events and decisions to make. Leeds had greeted him with the sound of the sirens of factories and engines. The interview had been cordial: The Council of the Institute had not yet officially met with him, but they had let him know that, if he would like, the position was his.

On his return, Edith was waiting for him on the doorstep of the house, trying to decipher his expression.

Do you really want to go up there?

Certainly not, I'd prefer to stay here. But I want to teach. To secure a future for you.

He turned into Broad Street and sat on a bench in front of Balliol, the small suitcase on his knees. There was another reason that was pushing him to try, a reason that he obviously had not really shared with Edith. To leave Oxford could be a way of escaping from the ghosts. The temptation was strong, but it could be a double-edged sword. Would they appear also somewhere else? It would be a sentence without appeal on his mental state.

In a city full of chimneys and smoke?

Leeds was ugly, sure. Plants, railways, workers' neighbourhoods grey and ghostly. But at the university he was guaranteed what would be heretical at Oxford. He would have a free hand in directing the literary and linguistic studies, differentiating them and at the same time making

them complementary. A unique opportunity for a lecturer of twenty-eight years at his first appointment.

Do you think that it is an easy choice? It could take months before I manage to find accommodation for you and the children.

I wish we were happy, Ronald.

He could not help but think of relocating as an exile, far from what he loved, people, places. Nostalgia for each place where he had lived caught him. His infancy in South Africa, then Birmingham, school, finally Oxford, Exeter College, which was now waiting for him on the other side of the street to listen to him reading in front of the audience of the Essay Club. An honour reserved to ex-students. He had established a particular bond with that city, which he would have to cut off, to change again, find a new way. Need did not leave him many options. If he were to stay, he would have continued to teach without a university professorship and recognition. A professor without a profession.

He looked at his watch. He had to go. It turned out that he was tenser than expected, it had been a while since he read in public. He had decided to retrieve *The Fall of Gondolin.*

The audience was limited to students and a few professors, who were calmly listening, in absolute silence. Ronald read slowly. He knew that he did not speak clearly, at school Chris would tease him, saying that he needed an interpreter. He tried to put more enthusiasm into the description of the great siege, taking care not to "eat" the words. He slowed down at the moment of the tragic death of King Turgon, sheltered with a few loyalists in the last tower, enclosed by flames, which at last crumbled with a terrifying roar. His voice grew hoarse when he reached the heroic sacrifice of Glorfindel who faced the Balrog, the demon of the abyss, to allow the retreat of the refugees and wounded. The silence became denser, as the fatally wounded monster was grasping the hair of the elf in a final burst of anger and dragging him with him to the bottom of the abyss.

At last he recovered his breath along with the survivors who were coming down the river Sirion, up to the Great Sea, under the guidance of the hero Tuor. His wife Idril and son of a few years were together with him. His name was Eärendel, half man half elf, ready to grow splendid in the new home of his father, in the narrow borders between the river and the sea. The sea that would have marked the destiny of the navigator.

He looked up, expecting to see them appear among the others, stiff in their dark uniforms. But in place of spectres he recognized a familiar face at the end of the room. For barely a fraction of a second, before it faded away under the thunderous applause. He let himself be wrapped by handshakes and questions that followed the reading. Old and new students complimented him and demanded to know more about his idea of *elfness* and whether the story had a sequel. He picked some names, Dyson, Coghill, it seemed to him. They dragged him to the refreshments made of tea and sandwiches. He felt stupid. Evoking spectres was the business of wizards and he certainly was not one. He surveyed the faces surrounding him, in search of that one whom he had glimpsed, until he was convinced he had imagined him.

A little later, as he was going back home, he found himself looking up at the windows of the Ashmolean Museum, still lit. He stopped in the middle of the pavement, suspended by a premonition that was pressing to become an intention. Without thinking he reached the stairway.

The custodian recognized him even though he had not returned to the Museum for a long time. He responded to the military salute and followed his own intuition inside.

On the upper storey, the display case of the rings was shining in the middle of the hall.

Lawrence turned slightly, without amazement, as if he was waiting for him.

"Hello."

Ronald approached.

"Were you at the reading?"

Lawrence nodded.

"I sneaked in. You're an excellent narrator, you know? Unlike me, who can't manage to write what I like."

"Mine are worlds of fantasy."

"What else can we write about if not about what concerns us? Your story is about survivors in a war. People like you and me. And of those who didn't make it."

Ronald did not know what to add. He was right, but hearing it from a stranger left him speechless.

"It seems we have betrayed all of them, right?" added Lawrence. "Friends, brothers . . ."

Ronald had again the instinct of confiding in him, like months before, when they had met in the same place. However, there remained a barrier between them. That man was wearing an armour of elvish metal, light but at the same time impenetrable.

He saw him draw his face near to the glass.

"Do you remember what you told me about the corruption of power?"

"I think so, yes," answered Ronald, and at that moment he understood that it was Lawrence who wanted to confide in him.

"For two years I have worn a ring like these. I used it to lead people who trusted me to a fruitless triumph. I have deceived them and me myself. It is this that I should write about, how much it cost me. It's difficult to reconcile it with the *epos* of the Revolt."

Ronald heard his voice become low and shaking, as if it did not belong to him.

"What about the ring?"

"I got rid of it." The thin hand spread over the smooth surface of the glass. "Sometimes it seems to me that I still have it on my finger. As if I missed it. I think it is the call to command,

the wish to still feel at the centre of action, making a difference. Or, only the absurd pretense of redeeming the dead."

There was something pitiful, moving, in the way he stared at the rings.

Ronald remembered the walk with Hogarth in those halls.

"Exactly here, once, I was told that it's up to us to decide how to use the small creative force that we are endowed with."

Lawrence smiled.

"Old Merlin has also told me this, a long time ago." He turned to look at him. "How does your story proceed?"

The question caught him by surprise. Ronald noticed that he did not have a response.

"I don't know."

"So perhaps you should find out."

Ronald nodded, without knowing what to add. Lawrence turned to stare at the rings again.

The last thing he saw before leaving him was his image reflected in the glass.

29. Deer

Robert would certainly call it a mighty spring. Like every spring, after all, that always seems unique. The air was fresh enough to keep the senses awake without freezing ideas. A subtle excitement was spreading under the skin of the city, the air was carrying the sounds in a more acute and vivid way. The students' bursts of laughter at street corners or in pubs could rack

the nerves, but not paralyze them, rather push them to accelerate to follow the rhythm of quicker, more coherent thoughts. At times he did not feel like a veteran on leave, father of a family, afflicted with psychological traumas, but only a twenty-five-years-old man, walking through the city, encountering whatever the day would have devised for him.

The fact was that his nerves were not allowing him to spend many hours among children's cries, and this was pushing him relentlessly down the hill, where, aware of his risk, he would rediscover human interaction.

He was seeing T. E. almost every day. They would go for a walk around Oxford, or pass hours talking in his lodgings. They had gone up to Elsfield, to take advantage of the hospitality of John Milner, the novelist, who nourished a real passion for the achievements of T. E.

Buchan was a curious species of a conservative, with whom Robert had discovered he had a paradoxical coincidence of views. At least in part. Their discussions would often end in a contest of who would rage more against the liberals and Lloyd George.

Then there were the writers hunting for inspiration. The more detestable ones. Lawrence of Arabia's fame was attracting them to All Souls as honey attracts flies. The previous evening Robert had to force himself not to fight with Ezra Pound. That conceited American

had made him regret that he had started talking to him. Pound continued to talk about the "vortex." What vortex? Was it his own view of poetry? What came to Robert's mind was the suction at the bottom of a sink. That bloke was convinced that a poem could do without syntax, which it had to get rid of like an old armour, to give the world the inner whirling feeling. But language is a code, it serves to communicate; if you eliminate it who understands you? At a certain point Robert had regretted the good old pugilistic dialectic: a jab at the chin would silence him for a while. He had even imagined doing it. He had nothing against modernism, poetry needed to cut a new path, but certainly it did not need people so full of themselves. The only serious attitude in confronting one's own period is not to take it too seriously.

T. E. listened to the discussion silently, very much amused. After Pound had left, Robert had relaxed on the armchair puffing out the air that was boiling inside.

"That man doesn't inspire any trust."

"He doesn't need it," T. E. had assumed a pompous tone. "He was once the secretary of Yeats."

Robert had responded with a rude gesture, and T. E. had laughed.

"By the way, he has said that the old man is staying at 5 Broad Street. What do you say we go ring the doorbell and run away?"

Robert had declined the invitation. To endure the idiocies of Pound he had filled himself with beer and was incapable of running.

The next evening he climbed the steps two at a time and knocked at the door, but no one answered. Burnes peeped from the servants' room.

"Colonel Lawrence is out, sir."

Robert was disappointed, thanked him and started to go back downstairs, but the voice of the attendant stopped him.

"Oh, no, sir, not that way."

Robert turned, saw him open the door of the lodgings and followed him inside. Burnes pointed to the open window.

"*That* way."

The expression of Robert was more than a question.

"The Colonel has said that if you come I should let you in."

"From there?" asked Robert incredulous.

"Yes sir. The Colonel has said that you are a climber and you would not have problems climbing."

Robert leaned outside and looked down, remembering that the last time he had climbed a mountain face was before the war. Luckily it would take only hoisting himself on the window sill and climbing up to the sloping roof. An easy task.

On the other side, the roof sloped towards a row of spires and battlements and marked a convenient path along all the quadrilateral. He heard someone chatting a little distance away and located three shapes sitting at the top. When T. E. noticed him, he stood up, as did the others. Robert noticed the city plan spread amongst them. A pair of notebooks and an eyeglass case were stopping the wind from blowing it away.

"I present to you Captain Graves," said T. E. "With him there are no secrets."

"That's not at all true," Robert corrected him sarcastically, "but at this point I'm curious."

They were two smart-looking students, who introduced themselves as Archer and Neville. They had the enthusiastic faces of those who feel they are part of a fraternity of invincibles.

"Are you organizing another strike?"

"No," responded T. E. "A kidnapping."

"Not the schoolmaster, I hope."

"Oh, no. Much better," said Archer.

"The deer of Magdalen College."

A moment of silence followed.

Robert looked at all three and was convinced that they were serious.

“Why?”

“Reprisal,” explained Neville. “Magdalen has stolen the funds needed for redoing the sports ground. The excuse was that they need to preserve their beautiful meadow for the herd.”

Robert turned to T. E.

“Is it your idea?”

“Doesn’t it seem that at Magdalen they always have the attitude of ‘we have deer but you don’t’?”

Robert smiled.

“And how would you do it?”

T. E. bent over to indicate a point on the map.

“At night we’ll act. Neville has made inspections: It’s a matter of breaking the lock of the back gate, entering the park, gathering the deer, and pushing them out. At that point we lead them here,” pointing downstairs, “and make them enter the main gate.”

“Thanks to a copy of the custodian’s key that we have taken,” added Neville.

Archer concluded, bursting out laughing: “And when those of Magdalen come to reclaim them, they are told that those are the herd of All Souls from 1475!”[xxiii]

“Effectives needed: five,” said T. E. “We need two other loyal persons.”

“One is Williams. He’s not very agile, but he can be on the lookout.”

Robert saw T. E. turn towards him.

“Captain Graves,” he said in a martial tone. “Even though you’re not a member of the college, we would be honoured to be able to count on your experience.”

Robert held back a smile with difficulty and clicked his heels together.

“For King and Country.”

The discussion continued about the date of the operation and there was not an easy agreement about this. Finally, they opted for the return from the summer vacations, which would be started soon. Archer and Neville took their leave, and they almost gave the military salute. They reached the ledge and came down into the room.

Robert and T. E. remained seated looking at the light setting behind Radcliffe Camera and the pinnacles of Lincoln College.

“If they’re caught, they would be expelled from the university, you know this, right?”

“It was you who told me that I should inspire them,” said T. E.

“It’s not exactly what I had in my mind.”

“They won’t find them, because I’ll lead them. This city needs a shake-up. Come, let’s take a walk.”

They walked on the roofs. They reached the major quadrilateral and they walked on the sides, passing behind the towers and over the library, up to the sundial. The sky was filling with stars and the moon was shining over the stretch of roofs, making their path visible.

“I come here often. It helps me think.”

They leaned on a spire at the corner, and Robert noticed that they reached the edge of the roofs of Hertford College.

It was time to ask him.

“Why don’t you want me to read the manuscript?”

T. E. looked down.

“It’s not ready yet. I’m not.”

“What does it mean?”

It seemed to him that the other was looking for the appropriate word.

“There are things that cost me a lot to write, and for which I’m not proud. Other things, well, I didn’t really manage to write. You never fight only for ideal reasons. You’re pushed by many reasons. Prestige, reward, a sense of duty, revenge and, why not? Even love. Things that can blind you, in the fray of a war of liberation. Then there’s what one endures. The suffering, the brutality.” His expression turned gloomy, distant, as if he was searching at the bottom of a turbid sea. Robert felt a chill. The emotion moistened his eyes, he had to swallow and control his breath while the other was continuing. “The truth is that life is something so intimate that under no circumstance the violence of a human over another should be justified.”

T. E. roused himself up and tried to lighten up the gravity of his thoughts.

“At least the epigraph is more effective now. Thanks to you.”

Robert decided to humour him.

“Everyone will ask who S. A. is. But you like mysteries.”

A shrug.

“Speaking of it makes me sad. It was my youth, my Grail. An idea that pushed me to risk everything. Ephemeral, like the venture that I left half done.”

None of the two knew what to add. T. E. bent his head, and when he raised it he had another look. “I’ve received a letter from Syria. The situation is alarming. Lloyd George deceives himself into thinking he can remain a bystander, but the entire region is exploding, from Jerusalem to Baghdad. Sooner or later the government will be forced to do something.”

“And you? What do you intend to do?”

He did not answer. He contented himself with looking at the stars, as if in a dream. For a while, they stayed silent. Then T. E. resumed talking, looking ahead.

“It was a clear night like this, the one before entering Damascus. The explosions were illuminating the sky beyond the hill, the air was shaking. The Turks and the Germans were exploding the powder kegs before retreating. A magnificent and terrible show. The prize was there, behind the last spurs of rocks, in the middle of the oasis that three million years ago welcomed the founders of the city. Our promise, the stake of the entire war.” His fingers launched towards the darkness, towards the dark outline of the roofs of Oxford. “We just had to reach out and take it. And yet, I was wandering around the camp amidst those accents, Australian, English, Arab dialects, without knowing at which camp fire to sit. I should’ve known, instead I wasn’t ready to lose the goal. The political reasons were vanishing and personal motives, my deep sentiments, were buried in the desert. That night I realised my task was done and that I would leave as soon as possible, not to return at all.”

Robert finished listening and waited for the words to sink in.

“It means that you won’t help them?” he asked.

T. E. moved away from the edge and remained standing near him.

“It’s not about helping the Arabs, Robert, but Britain. Before it’s too late.”

They came down to the lodgings in silence, where a solitary candle was burning. T. E. suggested to him to stay and sleep and Robert accepted willingly.

T. E. said that he was not used to sleeping on the bed and offered it to Robert, while he lay down on one of the carpets. Robert preferred to adapt to the local custom and stretched near him. They put out the candle and stayed like that, side by side, without wishing or needing to talk. Through the window glass the moonlight was hitting the wardrobe’s ajar door. The last thing that Robert saw before closing his eyes was a white strip of a mantle that was sticking out through the crack.

Lord Dynamite

Damascus, October 1918

In the midst of the convoy of trucks, the Rolls Royce advances slowly. The driver curses, while trying to elude the potholes. He apologizes to the two passengers, who, however, are not paying attention, intent on observing the people assembled to watch them pass. Someone applauds, but most are quiet—a long line of faces, dark and anonymous.

General Allenby searches for signs of the explosions, but except for the awful street pavements, the city appears intact, even lethargic.

At his side, Colonel Clayton flicks off the dust on his sleeve and moustaches.

“It looks like we can’t complain. The Germans were merciful to Damascus.”

Allenby clicks his tongue.

“I wasn’t worried by them. Or the Turks. But put together the exuberance of the Australians and the litigiousness of the Arabs and you have an explosive mixture.”

“General Chauvel has full control of his cavalry. As for the Arabs . . . we are in the hands of Lawrence.”

Allenby answers with a mumble.

“That man doesn’t cease to amaze me. I wasn’t expecting him to obey orders to stop, but how he managed to arrive here before anybody remains a mystery. What do you think?”

“I have no idea, sir. To be honest, I also don’t know anything about how those Bedouins managed to annihilate the IV Army Corp of Jemal. Yet they did it. And with a certain ferocity, apparently.”

“As long as His Majesty's soldiers do not commit certain cruelties, I sleep soundly.”

“This is the advantage of having native allies,” Clayton concludes.

The Rolls Royce stops in front of an elegant building. On its facade is splashed Victoria Hotel.

Clayton indulges in a little smile.

“I bet he did not choose it at random.”

“Yes.” Allenby opens the door and while stepping down points to the top of the roof, where an Arab flag hangs. “And that one too.”

Clayton’s smile vanishes.

They reach the entrance quickly, forcing the escort to run after them up the stairs. On the threshold await them the greetings of the guards and that of an elderly officer, clothed in the uniform of the Australian Cavalry.

Both respond with a quick gesture.

“General Chauvel, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Welcome, sirs. This way please.”

The Australian makes his way through the hall crowded with soldiers at attention and leads them into what must be the dining room of the hotel. The tables are pushed against the wall, with the exception of those at the centre, over which a map of Damascus is spread. The light from the steamed-up windows that are covered with heavy curtains is not enough to brighten the room.

Chauvel apologizes.

“Unfortunately, the electric power is still intermittent. Lawrence is trying to solve the problem. The last three days were rather eventful.”

Allenby is already looking at the map.

“I have to admit that your message alarmed me. I expected to find a civil war in full progress.”

“In fact, we had to thwart a surprise attack by a pair of Arab lords, self-proclaimed governors. Fortunately, they did not draw many followers in the city. For some unknown reasons, Lawrence didn’t want to shoot them.”

Allenby raises an eyebrow.

“Lawrence? Is he the one who is in command here?”

Chauvel nods.

“As proxy of Prince Feisal. Given the circumstances and not having received provisions, I let him do it.”

Clayton does not suppress a dejected sigh, while Allenby walks round the table in big steps.

“Proceed.”

“The Arabs set up a kind of State Council, presided over by Major Lawrence.”

Allenby and Clayton exchange explicit glances.

“The Council elected a military governor, a certain Ali Riza Rikabi,” Chauvel continues. “So far they have dealt with the immediate emergencies, but the principal problem is the provisions. I take this opportunity to point out that I have four thousand horses to feed.”

After a few moments of silence, Allenby’s face relaxes, and he leans over the edge of the table.

“Very well.” The remark stuns the other two. “Very well,” he repeats. “At any rate we’re here now. The Navy will download these supplies in Beirut the moment the city is evacuated.”

Chauvel coughs softly.

“The news is a few hours old, General. An Arab flag hangs over Beirut,” pointing to the ceiling, “the same one that we have on the roof.”

Allenby stares at him in amazement, as he processes the information. At last, he shrugs.

“Less work for us.” He leans towards Clayton. “You believed in the Revolt from the beginning. It just seems that your children have grown up.”

At that moment the room is flooded with light as the day. The officers stand up, their eyes on the *fin-de-siècle* chandelier that up to that moment they had not noticed.

“*Fiat Lux*.”

They recognize the voice and the man in the doorway, his hand still on the switch.

“Ah, here’s our god on earth,” comments Allenby.

Lawrence joins them at the centre of the room. No greeting, the Arab garments and the worn-out headdress, his scruffy countenance is that of one who stands up only by will.

“Heavens, how long have you been awake?”

“More or less since we entered the city.”

Clayton offers him a chair, but he refuses.

“Welcome, sirs. Damascus greets you.”

“Can you give me a detailed report?” asks Allenby.

Lawrence moves his hand over his eyes, to draw away the veil of tiredness that hovers over him.

“Certainly. We set up a public security service and requisitioned everything that could serve the purpose. The telegraphic connection with Jerusalem functions again. The streets and the aqueducts have been cleaned up. We’ve begun food rationing, but the Turks left nothing. The engineers have just managed to restore the railway line, so far the supplies had arrived on camel backs from nearby villages. We’re burying cadavers in common graves, to prevent an epidemic, but I have a hospital full of wounded and dying Turks. We’re short of everything: We need supplies, medicine, medical personnel. . .”

“Don’t forget the food for my horses,” Chauvel intervenes.

Lawrence nods nervously.

“I know it, General. I’ll do what’s possible, if you promise to restrain your soldiers who have hoarded Turkish money and are squandering it around the city.” He turns to the other two. “In the last forty-eight hours the dinar was devaluated 300 percent. We are trying to secure an exchange with the commandeered gold of Akaba, but there’s no working mint.”

“All right, all right,” interrupts Allenby. “We’ll fix everything.”

Clayton draws their attention to a grim-looking Bedouin, standing on the threshold of the hall, between two soldiers. Lawrence hurries to join him. They exchange a few words in Arabic. When he returns, he is half smiling.

“I think you have to follow me, gentlemen.”

“Where?”

“To the station. Feisal is arriving.”

The news runs through the streets along with the convertible Rolls Royce. The passersby stop to look at the unusual passengers: an Arab seated among three British officers. The shouting becomes louder, the melodic conversation of Syrians fills the alleys, the coffee houses draw up their rolling shutters. Lawrence notices Allenby’s curious look.

“Damascus awakens from a four-century sleep.”

“My congratulations, Lawrence. So far you’ve done an excellent job.”

“Thanks. But there’s still much to do, and, frankly, I think my time here is up.”

“All you need is a good night’s sleep,” Allenby cut him short.

At the station the khaki uniforms make a cordon to keep away the jubilant crowd. The Rolls Royce stops to let the officers off, as Feisal appears on the footboard of the train, greeted with a roar of enthusiasm.

He comes down with light steps and advances towards Allenby, slim and elegant compared to the massive shape of the Englishman. The two men meet in the middle of the street and shake hands in the deafening uproar. Lawrence translates the words of welcome.

Allenby invites the Prince to climb up into the automobile and they leave through the celebrations in the streets. What greets them is a forest of headdresses and hats thrown up in the air, together with the joyous trills of women who remove their veils and shout their names in a chorus.

Feisal! Feisal! Urens! Urens!

The Prince's eyes betray his emotions and tears stream down his face. He almost cannot read the letter Allenby gives him, in which the Foreign Office identifies the Arabs as a belligerent force.

When they arrive at the hotel, the honour guard deployed by Allenby presents arms and raises the banners.

Next to the Arab flag flutters the Union Jack.

They sit around tables pushed together at the centre of the dining hall, where the map of Damascus has been replaced by a map of the Middle East. The Englishmen on one side, Feisal and his councilors on the other, Lawrence all by himself. He stands with his hands on his lap and his shoulders stiff.

Allenby clears his voice and turns to him.

"Very well. First of all, explain to the Prince that it's necessary that he send precise orders to his partisans in Beirut. The Anglo-French Navy needs to unload food and materials and take charge of the local administration."

Lawrence translates in a toneless voice. He waits for Feisal's short reply and changes it into his native language.

"He says that he doesn't see why they would do so, since it is an Arab city and the British are his allies."

Allenby speaks, turning to the Prince now.

"The British and the Arabs are not the only architects of this victory. Britain is an ally of France and, based upon previous treaties, Lebanon and Syria are destined to become French protectorates. Palestine will be placed under a shared administration, for the time being ruled by us."

When Lawrence finishes the translation, Feisal stares at him for a long time, as if waiting for him to correct an error. But little by little he seems convinced of what he has just heard. He turns toward Allenby, his face a sheet of ice, his voice a barrage of rocks.

The General hears Lawrence's translation.

"He says this is unacceptable. No one has ever told him about France's involvement. To deprive the Arab nation of an outlet to the sea is tantamount to make it dependent on a new master. He is willing to accept the British protection, but not to shrink the borders in favour of a foreign state."

Allenby's reply is only for his subordinate.

"I don't understand. Haven't you told him that France would have the protectorate over Syria?"

“No, sir. I didn’t know that at all.”

The General crunches his jaw and attempts to look for Clayton’s support, who, however, is looking down. He turns to Lawrence.

“But you had to know at least that Prince Feisal would not have a say in the matter of Lebanon.”

“No, sir. I didn’t know this.”

Allenby stiffens, Lawrence’s face is blank. It is as if you could see through him.

“Don’t make me believe that you are ignorant of the Sykes-Picot Treaty!”

“No, sir. If you don’t pretend to make me believe that the Arabs should have fought for something less than Damascus and an outlet to the sea.”

Silence.

“Is this what you promised him?”

“Yes, sir.”

Allenby does not lose his composure

“Then you’ll have to explain to him that you didn’t have the authority to do this.”

Lawrence crunches his shoulders. He prepares to turn to Feisal, but the Prince stops him. He exchanges a few words with his councilors and is ready to speak again. Only this time he speaks in English, slowly, leaving everyone petrified.

“Damascus and Beirut were liberated by Arab divisions, General. Does Britain, which you represent here, want to ignore this fact?”

Everyone notices the glance exchanged between the General, Clayton, and Chauvel.

“Truthfully, Your Highness, the report of Brigadier General Chauvel states that the first Australian cavalrymen reached the Damascus perimeter at the dawn of October 1.”

Lawrence’s nails dig into the edge of the table.

“I myself sent a vanguard in the city the night before, to make contact with the resistance.”

Allenby waits for Chauvel's comment, which is an impassive reply.

“Not as far as I know.”

Lawrence stares at the Australian with disdain amidst a burst of indignant comments by the Arabs, immediately put to rest by a gesture of Feisal's hand. The prince hides his anger under the coat of silence, suggesting that Allenby must make a decision, from which he will draw the consequences.

The Bull allows himself only a few seconds for reflection.

“Your Highness, I’m not a politician, only a soldier, and I have the responsibility for the outcome of this campaign. You have the rank of general under my command and are required to follow the orders. You must act in concert with the French liaison officer. These are my provisions. The whole thing will be resolved when the war is over.”

The tone does not admit any reply, nor in fact is there one. Feisal stands up, pale, and takes his leave without ceremony, followed by his own people.

Only when the noise of their steps completely dies down, does Allenby relax in the chair. No one feels the obligation to say anything. The rustling of Lawrence’s garments as he stands up is an ominous and gloomy sound.

“Sir.”

“Yes?”

“I have a request to make.”

Allenby shows off the most indifferent air he is capable of.

“I’m listening.”

“I ask permission to leave.”

“A permission? Just now when there’s much to do?”

“No, sir. I’d like to take my leave. I think it’s better that I go away. I would like to return home, to England.”

Allenby pretends not to notice Clayton’s agitation by his side. He stares at Lawrence for a moment longer, before giving him the response that he expects.

“I think you’re right.”

The small one bows in an eastern gesture of respect and moves far away from them in silence.

“Lawrence?” Allenby calls him when he’s already near the door.

He turns.

“I promote you to Lieutenant Colonel. Have a most pleasant journey home.”

“Thank you,” he answers with a faint voice, before leaving them.

30. Heading Home

What Jack had not told Mrs. Moore before leaving was that he would not go directly to Liverpool to embark. He had kissed Mrs. Moore and Maureen goodbye and dashed off to the station to take the first train to London.

The idea had been forming for days, little by little as he was reading the book recommended by Vaughan, *The Commonwealth of Nations.* He had borrowed it from the Bodleian, after having read back issues of *The Round Table*, Curtis's magazine. Without the exams to be prepared he had managed to read everything at ease, forcing himself not a little, given his natural disinterest in political issues. The good old logical method learnt at Kirkpatrick's school had done the rest.

The detour would take away a couple of days from the summer vacation, but nobody would notice, much less his father who was expecting him in Belfast. They were the last performances of Lowell Thomas's show before leaving on a world tour, in all English-speaking countries. He would buy a ticket just as he arrived in the city. Twenty-four hours later he would be on a train heading home.

A new excitement pushed him to review the notes enthusiastically, ignoring the other passengers and the landscape outside the window. He had filled a notebook with close notes, copying entire summaries, and painting a most interesting picture.

The Round Table was a strange intersection between a political circle and the chivalric order. It is difficult to understand how much its members believed in the Arthurian reminiscences, but one thing was certain: they had a strong and clear idea of the future.

In the pages of the magazine they dealt with various topics in international politics. For example, they put forth various historical reasons in favour of the rivalry between France and Great Britain, while supporting the natural affinity between the British and the Americans, sons

of the same culture. According to the new knights, even the Germans were not considered natural enemies of England, since they belonged to the same stock. The severe conditions of peace imposed upon the old Prussian Empire were counterproductive, because they impeded the natural recovery of Germany beside the Anglo-Americans. In more than one article, they maintained that Germany could play a valuable role in curbing French revanchism and be a stalwart against the affirmation of the Bolsheviks in Russia.

Curtis and his associates believed firmly in the supremacy of the white, Anglo-Saxon elite over the postwar world, and it was clear that all these references to history were meant to resonate with the present time. The project, outlined by Curtis in his book, involved dragging the British Empire into the future, with necessary modernization. The imperial model had to be surpassed by a Community of Nations bonded by the British Crown in solid political, economic, and cultural ties. Great Britain and her satellite domains and the United States had to become the engines of the world in the decades to come. According to Curtis, this hegemony could be affirmed only in one way: abandoning the old colonialist canon and cultivating ruling classes no longer in the ranks of the Empire, but locally. The new imperial form would be founded on the alliances with indigenous leaders and on a relative autonomy from Great Britain, which in this manner could propose herself as a defender of liberty and people's welfare.

Jack was impressed. He could not have said whether those people were more or less reliable, but they certainly were looking ahead, using spectres, drawing up policies for governments and heads of state.

And Lawrence? What was his role in all this?

To understand this he had to read the press of the last weeks on the brawl that broke out about the Middle East affair. Another massive dose of political history, to cause indigestion. When in '17 the Bolsheviks had signed the unilateral peace, making Russia exit the war, they had also revealed a secret agreement between of the Allied Powers for partitioning the Middle East. According to newspaper reports, a few months before the explosion of the Arab Revolt, the English official Sykes and that Frenchman Picot had established their respective areas of influence and dominion. Only the Arab peninsula, that is the desert, would be turned over to the Arabs. No Mediterranean port, nor a city of any importance. The drunken words of Vaughan became clearer.

In the letters he had published in newspapers, Lawrence talked of the betrayal of the Arab allies, the giving in to the French blackmail, and he maintained that he also was deceived in his turn by his own government, which had pushed him to give his word to Feisal, and then renege on it. A victim among victims. While flipping through the dailies, Jack had a sarcastic grin on his face. The Uncrowned King of Arabia was a fraud. One could bet that the reason why nowadays he was inveighing against the cowardly acts of his leaders was that his work did not get him the desired results. It was enough to read between the lines: that continual exalting of the friendship with the Hashemite princes, singing the praises of the glorious Arab cause. For what purpose?

The answer was like the result of a mathematical equation, obtained by adding together all the factors, hundreds of read pages. A Great Arabia, extended from the Red Sea at the

Euphrates, under the protective wings of the British. An ally as much submissive as it is crucial in the postbellum game, for the joy of the acolytes of The Round Table.

The Arabs were nothing but pawns in the hands of the Westerners. If one had to guess, Lawrence was the actor of a double game from which he was hoping to emerge unscathed.

Jack realised one thing: That man was his nemesis.

The decision was born some evenings before, while returning to college. Under a lamp-light he had seen those two fellows passing side by side. He had quickly recognized Robert Graves and only later, when he had walked farther, Lawrence. In a few moments the features of his face were superimposed on the only photograph he had seen in the newspaper, in the pose of a Musulman prince. Those two seemed great friends. What had Darsey said? *They welcomed him in Parnassus.* Lawrence managed to deceive them, the poets who were singing the inhumanity of the war.

It was at that moment that he had decided. Perhaps he was looking for a justification, something to defend his choices with the aegis of an overwhelming and irreparable consistency. Lawrence had betrayed everybody and yet he was carried in triumph in the streets.

He got off the train and let himself be swallowed into the chaos of London. He bought the ticket for Albert Hall from a little kiosk in Charing Cross Road, and at nine o'clock sharp he was seated in the audience waiting for Mr. Thomas to start the exhibition.

He listened to the story with extreme interest, and as that melodic voice was leading him to the discovery of the Land of the Orient, he slowly realised that his anger would not pollute his will anymore. He engraved the most interesting sentences in his mind, and when he was back on the street he hurried to write them down in his notebook, while the inspired voice of the ham actor repeated the salient news in his ear.

The county of Galway, in the western part of the island of Ireland, is the place of origin of the ancient family of Lawrence. Among their more famous ancestors is Sir Robert Lawrence, who accompanied Richard the Lionheart to the Holy Land, and who distinguished himself in the siege of Acre. Just as the young Lawrence seven-hundred years later would stand by the side of Allenby, to liberate the same place. His father, Thomas Lawrence, was a landowner who, having lost many of his possessions due to the devaluation during the Gladstone times, moved with his family to the other side of the Irish channel. And here, in the village of Tremadoc, in North Wales, not far from the birth place of Mr. Lloyd George, the prime minister, on August 16, 1888 Thomas Edward Lawrence was born.

Jack walked back to the small guest-house where he would spend the night, a crumbling hovel that housed too many six-legged beings. But that did not bother him, a few hours of sleep and he would be on his way again to the station. Now he had an intermediate destination, a small Welsh village from which he would start his research that would take him home. His father was expecting him in three days.

Before falling asleep, he thought of the old and battered Ireland. He wondered how he would find it. In March the government had sent counterinsurgency units and the IRA response was quick. The conflict was degenerating, no day would pass without a bloodshed.

It was useless to deny that by now he was feeling estranged from the destiny of the island, yet everything had begun over there, and not just for him, it seemed.

He left in quest of the knights of the crusades and old colonialists, ready to climb the genealogical trees to find answers to a very simple question.

Who was Lawrence of Arabia?

31. Bouzincourt

The humid smell of the straw mattresses came out again intact from a corner of his brain, together with the sensation of an itch, caused by lice. The rumble of cannons in the distance. The grief over the wounded transported in the rear of the front; no rest for the senses. The glance that

finds escape only on high, in the starry sky, where questions clash together, the same questions for everyone, the same letter, left in custody to whoever will be able to deliver it.

Dearest Edith . . .

The envelopes are closed. Along with the chow, a cup of rum that will not make him sleep. The tinkling of tablespoons against the mess tins betrays the shared anguish.

Geoffrey stops eating and stretches on the stinking mattress. The light from the lantern shows every crease in his face, making it look yellow and decrepit.

"Do you think Rob was afraid? That he realised it?"

Ronald also puts down the mess tin. A sigh as he rotates his wedding ring on his finger.

"They have told me that at La Boiselle it was terrible. He was with the first wave . . ."

"My God," the voice of Geoffrey is a low murmur. "If it must happen to me, I hope it would be quick."

"Chris wrote to me. He got the news. I told him that for me the TCBS is over."

Geoffrey sits down.

"Never say it! As long as one of us lives, the society lives."

Ronald avoids looking at his face. There is no provocation to pick up. They are only sad and afraid, like anyone down here.

"Not for me, Geoffrey. I'm sorry, but I cannot do it."

"What does it mean?"

Geoffrey's black eyes are wells of anger, but it is not the time to lie, to carry this burden.

"I don't feel any more part of a complete body. Something is broken. The truth is that we won't be able to be what we had imagined. Not all together, at least. We are individuals now, hurled here in this place, and come what may, our destiny concerns every one of us."

Geoffrey does not hide his dismay, noticing it tighten Ronald's soul and stomach.

"You really think so?" he comes nearer. "In this way you make Rob's life meaningless, what he believed, what we all believed. We've always said that our destiny was to light a new light, or rather, to re-ignite the ancient light in the world, remember? All that we dreamed, that we had in mind, poetry, truth, loyalty. Doesn't it mean anything to you anymore?"

"I haven't said this. But you can't pretend that it's like it was before."

Geoffrey shakes his head.

"It's not like before, Rob is dead. But this way you betray him. You're letting the war defeat us, John Ronald. You're withdrawing and I can't accept this from you."

The words cut into them like the cleaver of a clumsy executioner. In Geoffrey's eyes, there is the desperate request not to be abandoned, but he knows that it is too late.

"I'm sorry, Geoffrey."

He cannot look up, fortunately it is Geoffrey who lies down and turns on his side.

For a moment Ronald has the hypocritical impulse to stretch his arm and touch his shoulder, but he realises that he cannot do it. He too lies down. Under the weight of the sky, the moon and all the stars, which wrings a prayer.

His index finger wiped out a tear in the corner of his eye. His look remained fixed beyond the window. For some reasons it seemed to him that the other passengers in the compartment were watching his every gesture. A sickly woman, a dapper young man, a mother with her son hanging at her neck. The forced rigidity and constriction due to sharing a small space. England was scurrying past outside the window. Going north, his mind was swinging between Oxford and Leeds, between the past and the immediate future. Light luggage. He brought with him the most important things: John's embrace at the station, Edith's kiss, his hand on her womb. But there were also the doubts, tightly shut up in the suitcase. Old ghosts and fear.

It seems that we have betrayed all of them, right?

Lawrence's words could sound enigmatic only for those who had not been to the front. They were spoken to a stranger, whose story he could not know, but to whom at that moment he felt closer than to anyone else. To recall the last time he had seen Geoffrey did not make him feel better, but it was inevitable. They had spent the rest of that night pretending to be asleep and at dawn they had shaken hands with a certain embarrassment.

"God only knows if I would not strangle you for what you have said, John Ronald. But I love you. Good luck."

"God bless you, Geoffrey."

In the following weeks he knew that Geoffrey had searched for him everywhere. But every time he did, his company had just left, moved around the chaotic chessboard of that "Big Push."[xxiv] It was easy to imagine that Geoffrey would want to talk more, try to convince him. Then the pyrexia had thrown Ronald into a camp-bed, in the rear, on a train bound for Calais, to a hospital in Birmingham, into the arms of Edith again. His war was over.

It was here that he had received Chris's letter from the ship on which he was stationed: three weeks before, Geoffrey had died due to the wounds received in the explosion of a grenade. Blood poisoning. Gangrene.

Gruesome images that Ronald again chased away, while the monotonous fields followed each other: sheep, horses, houses. Poppies. He recalled one of the rare walks with Geoffrey in a field like that one, the last one spared from bombardment and mud flooding. Every flower a red spot. *Screened is this nook o'er the high, half-reaped field*. How far was Oxford, then? They had

discussed literature, exchanged notes, not caring about the war, not letting it take away their vision of the future. They did not yet know that Rob had died the first of July. They were both lying in the grass face up, and Geoffrey had asked for a poem. To escape from there, to continue to keep alive what they had been friends for, the memories of afternoons in the library, the stories shared, the dreams and the adventures of the youth that was ending.

He had sought the memory of Edith and of the time before the Fall, before the world sank into the Somme. He had gotten into these thoughts and started.

Eärendel sprang up from the Ocean's cup

In the gloom of the mid-world's rim . . .

Eärendel

Autumn 1920

32. Letters

> The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with dignity and honour. They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. The Baghdad communiqués are belated, insincere, incomplete. Things have been far worse than we have been told, our administration more bloody and inefficient than the public knows. It is a disgrace to our imperial record, and may soon be too inflamed for any ordinary cure. We are to-day not far from a disaster.[xxv]

He was hungry and wanted a drink also. He had spent his last penny two days before, he was beginning to feel weak. The temptation to lie down on a park bench and sleep was strong, but he knew that he would not do it. He did not want to demean himself like scroungers full of scabs who ask for alms in the park and are cursed at and shooed away by Bobbies. Not Andy Mills.

The days were shorter now, and when darkness would fall he would begin to feel really alone, for the first time afraid of the future. It was a new sensation for him, which made him feel tired of being a shadow, always waiting for a lucky break. He knew someone who managed to trap a lord, who had brought him to live in his country estate, where he went to see him when he wanted. But who knows, perhaps it was a local fairy tale, created to console one so as to continue hoping that something beyond this disgusting situation could happen.

He pulled his threadbare jacket around him and looked at his face reflected in a puddle. He had the feeling that his smile was losing resolve. He was not too sure of himself anymore, even though he still had the ability to draw men into a doorway or in some tavern in Soho.

He quickened his steps, the sheet from a newspaper tight under his arm, as if it were a precious object and not a scrap from the week before found near an ice cream kiosk. A fortuitous gift of the wind, which had dragged it to his shinbone, letting it rub against him like a faithful animal. The article that was interesting to him spoke of the Revolt that occurred that summer in Mesopotamia. The Arabs were rising up against the British military administration. Ned wanted everyone to know that the things in those parts were really shitty, the kind that pull you down. He was taking it to heart, as he had done for his prince friend. And who knows, maybe he could even be right.

> We said we stayed to deliver the Arabs from the oppression of the Turkish Government, and to make available for the world its resources of corn and oil. We spent nearly a million men and nearly a thousand millions of money to these ends. . . Our government is worse than the old Turkish system.

Andy realised he was furtive and hurried, careful not meet the eyes of the passersby. That day he had decided that the deal had to be different, the stakes higher. If he could not have a residence in the country, at least he could buy new clothes, shoes, and eat in a proper restaurant, where the fauna was better selected. He would have never caught a big fish as long as he kept pimping himself at the Garden. At the beginning he had thought that his winning card could be Ned, even though the latter had never laid a finger on him. But when he realised that the man was crazy, he ran away fast on his heels.

Who would have thought that he would come back with a gust of dust? Reading his letter on that solitary page the idea came to him. If Ned could not save him, he could at least have damned him. It would be his chance to earn a penny. Just enough to enter the most chic circle.

He had to stop to rest a little, he was feeling weak. After coming up with the idea, he immediately thought of the competition and found the address of the editorial office that interested him. The move was risky, but it was necessary to try.

He pulled himself together and continued walking.

> The Government in Baghdad have been hanging Arabs in that town for political offences, which they call rebellion. The Arabs are not rebels against us. . .Are these illegal executions to provoke the Arabs to reprisals on the three hundred British prisoners they hold? And, if so, is it that their punishment may be more severe, or is it to persuade our other troops to fight to the last?. . .How long will we permit millions of pounds, thousands of Imperial troops, and tens of thousands of Arabs to be sacrificed on behalf of colonial administration which can benefit nobody but its administrators?

William Keane had enough skill in his trade to intuit in one glance who was sitting in front of him. That he was a former soldier was clear from how he had stiffened when the young man told him who he was. Also his posture recalled a martial past. His clothes were cheap, in need of a tailor. His regular facial features were overshadowed by pallor and the shadow of an unshaven beard. Everything worked together to identify him as a broken-up veteran, one of those misfits. The way he looked at him, in addition, suggested also something else: a habit of

indiscreet glancing, winking, which were difficult to restrain even in that situation. But Keane did not want to imagine anything beyond that.

It had been a coincidence that he was going back to the newsroom at that time, to replace a piece in the evening edition. The concierge did not greet him, being involved in a heated discussion with this scruffy man. Keane, amused, stopped to watch the scene. The young man was trying to explain that he had important, top secret information for the director. A lost battle. Old Singe was like one of the megaliths of Stonehenge, immobile, imperturbable.

Keane had felt a movement of human solidarity for the oldest dependent of the newspaper and had decided to intervene.

"Pardon me, perhaps I can help you."

The young man had turned, exhibiting a pale face, crowned by a black, curly tuft.

"Who are you?"

"William Keane, editor-in-chief."

He had held out a hand, which the other had barely clasped.

"The director is not here, and he wouldn't see you anyway. You could take advantage and let me help you, if you so wish."

The young man thought about it, then nodded, but without saying anything.

A sign to Singe, and the old man returned to the guard post.

"What is it about?"

The young boy spread a sheet from the newspaper under his nose, pointing to an article.

"About him."

"May I know about what?"

"His private life."

"Can't you be more precise?"

"Not without a fee."

"I understand. Why don't we go to my office, then?"

When Andy Mills finished telling the story, Keane poured a drink for both and swallowed the Scotch in one gulp. Even though he did not let his thoughts show, they were moving quickly and did not give him time to be pleased for having guessed the identity of the subject. A ticking bomb with a high potential, one of those which leave much rubble and fiery splinters. To be managed with care.

"I have to be sincere with you, Mr. Mills. It's a story that would need some concrete evidence."

The young boy nodded.

“Yes sir. I have it.”

Keane placed his hands on the table, his expression neutral. He saw the young boy pull a key out of his pocket

“His flat. Where he stays when he comes to town.”

Keane swallowed without letting him see, the image of a German Zeppelin over the roofs of London, ready to drop bombs, came to his mind.

He drove it away standing up from the chair. He picked up his jacket and hat.

“Take me there.”

They took a taxi to the river and walked the rest of the way. It was dark by now, and the government buildings were curled up calmly on the chest of London.

Andy went up the stairway, and as he inserted the key into the keyhole, Keane did not know what to wish for.

Under the dim light of the only lamp, the room appeared bare. Andy waited near the door so Keane could look around. A desk, sofa/bed, a small bathroom.

He sighed.

“There’s nothing here.”

“I think he’s in Oxford.”

Keane turned towards Andy.

“I mean it could be anyone’s flat and your story a load of rubbish to tap money from me.”

The young man looked at him angrily.

“You’re a newspaper man. Do what you need to do.”

Keane shook his head smiling and looked around the room again. At that moment he noticed the wastepaper basket under the table. It contained only a pair of curled up papers. He spread them under the light.

“My God,” he murmured.

He knew for certain that he went pale.

“Marsh speaking.”

“Keane.”

“Hello, William. Sorry you had to wait, but I was in a meeting with the prime minster. Good or bad news?”

“You be the judge. In the other room there’s a young man who has just told me a scandalous story about Colonel Thomas Edward Lawrence. The main ingredients are masochistic habits and self-destructive impulses.”

“You won’t take seriously the first mythomaniac who presents himself? Leave these things to the gossip magazines.”

“No, Eddie, this chap isn’t imaginative enough to mount such a hoax. And, above all, he has the keys to his house. He’s a drifter who hangs about Covent Garden. Very young and very charming, you know what I mean?”

“I understand.”

“I was in the flat. In the waste paper basket there was a rough copy of a signed letter to Lord Cuzon. I have it in my pocket.”

Silence.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I know that you know Lawrence personally. If I leak the thing down into the newsroom, we might witness the fall of the idol of the moment. "

“An uncomfortable idol. He does nothing but attack the foreign policy of the government.”

“Don’t bluff with me, Eddie. Everyone knows that your good friend Churchill is in disagreement with Lloyd George and would like a retreat from Mesopotamia against the opinion of all the High Imperial State.”

“Internal dialectics of the government.”

“Rubbish. The letters of Lawrence in newspapers are helping you. He supports your viewpoint.”

“So what? Who says that we are interested in protecting him?”

“Let’s put it this way: if he falls, does he fall alone? You remember the scandal of the 47,000.”

“A public stunt which resulted in nothing.”

“But how many people have risked ending up in the middle of it? Many of your friends, it seems to me, including myself. Don’t tell me that you didn’t have cold sweats too.”

“What do you want from me, William?”

“That you ask me to let the thing drop. So we’ll be finally even.”

A sigh in the receiver.

“And to think that once you even said you loved me. Look to what things you're reduced.”

“The part of the little virgin doesn’t suit you, Eddie. We were young and I am tired of being in debt. I expect a response.”

Silence again. Then three words only.

“Cover up everything.”

“I wanted to hear this.”

“The name of the young man?”

“Forget about it. Protection of sources.”

“Come on, William.”

“*Au revoir*, Eddie.”

Keane interrupted the communication. He opened the desk drawer and withdrew some bills. He joined Andy in the corridor and gave him the money.

“Run away as far as you can, listen to me.”

“Where?” asked the young man as he was counting the bills.

“Wherever you like, but leave the city.”

“I want more money.”

“Be off.”

“I’ll go to another newspaper.”

Keane shook his head.

“It’s a matter much bigger than you, believe me. If you speak to the wrong person you’ll be in trouble.”

“I’ll go to another newspaper,” he repeated undeterred.

Keane sighed and returned to his office. Seated at the desk he watched Andy Mills walking away. He wished him good luck.

33. Everything Must Change

It was an epiphany. When Robert came home, he found them seated at the table, facing each other. Nancy's pencil was moving rapidly in spurts, her eyes darting from the model to the paper.

Robert dried the sweat from his face, apologizing for being late. He had a flat tire and had to climb to the street with the bicycle on his shoulder. T. E. was a little stiff, not knowing whether to step out of his pose to shake his hand or keep still under Nancy's eagle eyes.

The chin line, the cheek bones, the thin mouth. Then the arched eyebrows, the high and flat forehead.

"Robert claims that you have maternal eyes."

Lawrence forced himself not to change expression.

"Really?"

"Creating a beautiful contrast with the cranial bone structure."

"What you say seems like an anatomical report."

"If I may be honest, you don't have the physique of a hero."

"You don't have to believe what you hear about me."

"Not even what you say? And anyway don't worry, I believe only what I see."

Finding them in a friendly conversation dissipated Robert's fear. When he had invited T. E. for breakfast, he had feared that Nancy could start a fight. The thought of leaving those two alone made him speed up his climb under the weight of the bike.

Instead here she is, a friendly lady of the house paying homage to her guest with a portrait sketch. Perhaps a benefit of the vacation that they had taken in August, pedaling up to Devon, coming across remarkable landscapes and interesting people. Since the birth of Jenny they had not been given the chance to be really alone. During the summer they managed to reconnect the threads of their relationship, escaping from the burden of economic need and family routine. They had met Thomas Hardy, the sacred monster. They just had to knock on his door, to find themselves in front of a cup of tea, in the best room of the house, talking to him and his wife.

Sharing new experiences, getting excited together with the privilege of having at their disposal the words to say it. One could be happy without saying anything, but succeeding in affirming a lived life, narrating it, had another flavour, fuller and longer lasting.

"Do you find it impertinent?"

"What?"

"That I wanted to do a portrait of you."

"No, it's fun."

"Yet you seem a little tense. It won't certainly be the first time."

"No. But the other painters . . ."

The pencil did not catch the embarrassed smile.

". . . were men," she anticipated him. "Do women intimidate you?"

"By no means. It's a personal shyness."

"Or maybe simply you don't know what to talk about."

"Sometimes it happens to me with women, yes."

"So that's why you aren't married. To escape the gaps during conversation."

"I'm afraid that matrimony is not for me, in fact."

"There must have been at least one important woman in your life."

A light blush on the cheeks.

"One, yes."

“What was her name?”

“Faridah.”

“Most beautiful name.”

“She was also very beautiful. She was my Arab teacher, a queen.”

“You speak in the past tense. What happened?”

A light gesture of his hand, as if caressing a spectre.

“It belongs to my previous life.”

When Robert presented Nancy’s project, he did so with some skepticism, convinced that T. E. would be on his side. But T. E. approved the project. Robert wondered if T. E. wanted to please her, but he seemed sincere.

Then, Nancy explained the syllogism formulated during the trip home from Devon. The inhabitants of Boar’s Hill have to come down to the city for their supplies. They certainly would wish the distance shorter, if it were possible. *Therefore*, to open a store on the hill would make a fortune to the Graves-Nicholson family. People would come also from Wootton and Foxcombe, perhaps even from Hinksey.

T. E. allowed himself to ask who would finance this enterprise.

“Loans,” answered Nancy. “From parents and friends. The Masefields are donating the land. The goods will be on consignment.”

She showed him the plan she had drawn up: a small, modest, wooden building.

“Robert told me that two of your brothers were killed in the war.”

“Yes. Also yours, right?”

“Wars have the nasty habit of snatching away loved ones. But I imagine you think that they are a sad collateral of history.”

“Germany had invaded Belgium and France.”

“Not Germany. The German imperialist bourgeoisie.”

“And wasn’t it right to stop them?”

“Certainly. With a social revolution, as the Spartacus League[xxvi] attempted to do, not by setting against them British imperialism. Or perhaps you think that our army occupied in suppressing rebellions around the world helps in liberating the people?”

A sad, worried look, which the pencil captures as it travels quickly over the porous surface of the paper.

“The paths of history are tortuous. I tried to support a national revolution, but I wasn’t successful in carrying it to the end. If I were more skillful, many things today wouldn’t have happened.”

“For being a timid person you’re full of yourself.”

Again he is embarrassed.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t you think that what happens is the responsibility of the people?”

“I imagine so. Yet I can’t pretend not having had a role in these events.”

“Is this why you have refused all honours? A sense of guilt?”

“I prefer to think that it’s out of consistency. I don’t intend to get any profit from what I’ve done. Not even from writing about it.”

“Ah, yes, your book. I hope you manage to include your contradictions. It would be a very interesting work.”

T. E. studied the portrait. Robert peered over his shoulder.

“Here’s the upteenth Lawrence. How many others will we find?”

“Is it really the way you see me?” T. E. asked Nancy.

“None is like the other,” Robert said.

“Yes,” replied Nancy. “Are you disappointed?”

“No. Can I keep it?”

“Certainly, it’s for you.” She smiled slyly. “An inspiration for your book.”

Robert looked at both, confused, aware that he had missed something.

During breakfast they discussed the store that would be opened. Nancy wanted to go to work at once, contact a carpenter, and look for suppliers.

“But do you see me behind a counter?” asked Robert, still searching for masculine complicity.

T. E. inclined his head to frame the scene: “With a green apron,” he replied. “I’ll give you one.”

Nancy burst out laughing. Then she stood up, gathered the dishes and passing behind her husband whispered in his ear.

“It’s a real job, Robert.”

At that moment Margaret appeared in the kitchen French door, purple with the effort to hold Jenny in her arms while pushing David’s pram inside.

“How many times have I told you to let her walk!” screamed Nancy. “She’s almost two.”

The kitchen door was suddenly closed and Nancy's reprimand became a soft rumble over the wall. Embarrassed, Robert suggested moving to the garden. When they were outside, he felt compelled to apologize.

“She’s convinced that the nanny spoils the children. Too much eating, too much sleeping . . .” He sighed. “If you have a family someday you will realise it.”

“No thanks,” said T. E. “A wife would know everything about me. What she’s not able to understand she would like to explain it the same, finding motivations that bring everything back to the everyday. Well, I hate the everyday. It kills my enthusiasm.”

“Yet it would fill your life,” resumed Robert. “Children, also, give immortality.”

They smiled. Robert suggested a walk up to Youlbury. At that hour of the day, they would not come across anyone.

They walked alongside the carriage-way and turned right, continuing between the forest and the edge of the fields which slope down softly to a valley. Oxford was floating on a veil of fog, which gave it the appearance of an enchanted city. They saw wild rabbits scuttling to slip into their holes, small dark growths in the bright green of the grass. They reached the forest and found themselves under a roof of branches that reached from one side of the road to the other. The only sounds were the shuffling of their steps and some birds flying away across their path. They arrived near Evans’s home and the scout camp, from where the view would again vanish into the horizon, beyond the city, pretending to reach London, the English Channel, the continent. Robert wondered who would enjoy this panorama, when he would not be there anymore, and if someone would go over these paths again, thinking of who had pounded them infinite times before then. The road of giants: Evans, Lawrence . . . together with the little Graves.

He noticed that T. E. had said something and he turned.

“Marsh?”

“Yes. He asked for a private meeting,” repeated the other. “Apparently the articles in the newspaper have hit the mark.”

Robert nodded. Edward Marsh was more than just a patron of the young poets of his generation. Eddie “The Mother Hen.” A gentle guide, able to encourage them in dark times, even in the face of death, to convince them not to stop believing in the power of words. But also a protector, able to transform a brilliant political career into an umbrella for the wet chicks coming back from the front, full of horrors to put into verses. Robert had turned to him to save Siegfried Sassoon from court martial.

“You decided to try again, then.”

“Over there some terrible things happen. The RAF bombards villages. It wasn’t enough for us to abandon the Syrians and Feisal to their fate, now we are tormenting Mesopotamia. And what for? Not to give away even a millimetre of land, at a cost of men and countless sums of money. It’s a folly, we’ve become like the Turks, even worse, and we’ll have the same end.”

“The swan song of the Empire is never a melody,” commented Robert.

The gloom of his thoughts was balanced by the fighting spirit that he felt rising inside his friend. He was pleased. He said to himself that he would always remember him like this, as he looked straight ahead and murmured in the wind.

“Everything will have to change. Everything.”

“If you go to London, we’ll have to postpone our raid on Magdalen. It’s scheduled for this weekend, it seems to me. Archer and Neville will feel bad.”

T. E. seemed not to listen.

“All in good time.”

They returned home, where T. E. was introduced to Jenny, who hid timidly between her father’s legs. When Robert cradled little David and put him in T. E.’s arms, he saw his friend stiffen and clasp the bundle afraid it might fall. He noticed that Nancy was giving him a frosty look, but he ignored it. T. E. was clumsy like a new father, like him when Jenny had been just born.

“Give my regards to Eddie Marsh,” he said when T. E. took his leave. “I’ll give him the new poems as soon as they’re ready.”

They remained on the doorstep to see him going down along the street, mounting on his bike, as light as a feather.

“Sometimes I wish you would look at me the way you look at him,” said Nancy.

“Are you jealous of our friendship?”

Nancy did not answer.

“That man scares me,” she said. “Cut him in two and you’ll find only scars. He’s still at war with everyone. Including himself. Sooner or later he’ll leave and you’ll be tempted to follow him.”

“Nonsense.”

“You are followers by nature. And you’ll have to choose which side you’re on.”

“I don’t want to argue,” said Robert.

Nancy raised her arms on the doorframe, then placed them around his neck. “Neither do I.”

She looked at him with an intriguing smile, before kissing him.

34. The Secret

The sunlight and the buildings’ shadow alternated on the cobbled surface. The comings and goings of students, professors, housewives, waiters was always the same, but it seemed to respond to a precise, orderly course. Even the noises were muted. The air was still fizzing in the summer.

Oxford was the same as always, yet new. Perhaps it was the difference with the greyness of Belfast that made Oxford appear this way to Jack. A calm place, where thought remained protected from the anxieties of history, shut tight within ancient palaces, full of books and discussions in low voices.

The weeks spent in Ireland had slammed in his face chronicles of chaos. He had left with a heavy heart. He was afraid that if the Republicans had taken power, his father could fall victim of some reprisals. In his youth he was passionately opposed to Home Rule and would have remained loyal to Great Britain until death. He considered himself a rationalist and there was no doubt that he was living in the wrong era, clinging to the past, while around everything was burning.

In the country mercenaries and reservists lacking honour hired by the London government to vent the hatred accumulated over the Somme raged against the civilian population. Bestiality repaid with the same token: an eye for an eye, loss for loss, son for son. The “terrible beauty” hailed by Yeats in “Easter 1916”[xxvii] was discharging all its power. It was the genesis of the new time, born of blood, like all births, from which should have arisen the New

Ireland. An Irish Ireland, as was called by the Republicans, even if Jack was struggling to understand what it meant, even if the noise did not help understand what it would become yet. There was something frightening in the cold determination of nationalists like Michael Collins. The mysticism of the ideal, the faith. The smoke of the dynamite smelled of God. Someone was saying that it was a religious war.

We know their dream; enough

To know they dreamed and are dead;

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died? ("Easter 1916" lines 70-73*)*

The verses of the poet: excessive love, a disease of the soul. That was the kind of Romanticism that was useless to interpret the present. His beloved Yeats proved to be a disappointment.

He was happy to be here again, away from everything. Certainly not yet free to be what he had chosen, but more determined. He wanted to end the deception. To do what he had to do he needed to feel unassailable.

While he was walking in the direction of the town centre, his stride revealed the mood of the return journey. He passed under the clock of Carfax Tower, into the shadow of centuries, and continued on High Street up to the college.

He found Charlie Darsey in the common room, busy reading a book. He approached, put down the suitcase, and stretched his hand.

"Hello, Charlie."

The other looked at him in surprise, while he returned the handshake.

"Welcome back, Jack."

"How about accepting my apologies for how I've acted lately?"

"Are you saying that you're returning among us common mortals?"

"Actually I'm leaving."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm moving out. I've rented a room."

"Are you leaving the college?"

"Only the bed and my half of the wardrobe. You'll share it with another one, perhaps more amiable than I."

Darsey went with him into the room, where Jack began to fill another suitcase with his things.

“But why? It won’t be for Moran, is it? That one is unpleasant to everyone.”

Jack smiled again.

“It’s a long story, Charlie. It’s better for me this way, believe me.”

“Have you asked for the dispensation?”

“I’ll do it. They’ll have no problem giving it to me, don’t you think? I’m removing myself from their expenditure.”

“But . . . But . . .” Charlie sat on the bed. “I don’t understand. Is it because of the nightmares? Have you had another relapse?”

Jack stopped folding up his shirts and looked at him.

“Life is already complicated enough without making it more difficult. When you make a choice it’s best if it’s as clear as possible, otherwise we’re weak and vulnerable. And I can’t afford it.”

“It has to do with your mysterious afternoons, true?”

“I told you. I need to clear my mind. By the way, have you seen Moran?”

“A little while ago he was down in the Quad talking with Pritchard. Don’t mind that one.”

Jack closed the suitcase and Darsey offered to carry the other one. They went downstairs and Jack walked in the courtyard, followed by his friend. When he noticed Moran talking with another student, he asked Darsey to wait for him with the luggage.

He approached.

“May I speak with you?”

Moran looked at him condescendingly then he took a few steps together with him.

“You can come out and spy on me whenever you want,” said Jack. “You know my address. I’m moving there.”

“It doesn’t concern me.”

“Rubbish. You wanted me to see you.”

“Wounded pride. You had struck me, remember?” Moran touched his cheekbone. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Furthermore, you should know me, I would never summon the institutional authority.”

“Because you’re a revolutionary? I thought that for you the end justifies the means.”

“Listen, I don’t know why you often go to that house, nor who lives there. I don’t want to know it, not anymore. Good luck, Lewis.”

Jack started to turn but held back.

“Tell me something. What is more revolutionary? Accepting the conventions,” he pointed to the building around them, “or having the courage to ignore them?”

Moran was silent.

“I’m leaving. Have a good stay.”

Jack turned on his heels, picked up the suitcases and said goodbye to Darsey.

“See you in class, Charlie.”

He walked fast up to Magdalen Bridge, where he stopped to rest his arms and clear his mind. He breathed deeply, watching the current in the river, so calm that it hardly rocked the boats. His Rubicon. *Alea iacta est.* He was feeling decidedly better and could direct the train of thoughts over the discoveries of that summer. They certainly had a relevant part in the step just taken.

Once someone had said to him that one lie always brings another, and another one, and so on, until a performance takes the place of real life. It was not by chance that the bigger tall tales about Lawrence of Arabia poured out from a stage. Sir Robert Lawrence, who had accompanied Richard the Lionheart in the third crusade, did not come from the county of Galway, was not even Irish, but from Lancashire, where apparently his stock had put down solid roots and grew a big trunk with leafy branches.

If it took little time to disavow Lowell Thomas's genealogical fantasy, he had to go a longer way to discover the truth at the centre of the labyrinth. The point of entry had been the small church of a small Welsh village, after the detour through a landscape of rocky hills and scattered flocks.

Tremadoc. Few houses swept by the salty wind, which he had watched with the emotion of one who penetrates the life of others, one step from the heart of a secret.

The old pastor, a curved, little, grey man with an alert look, remembered the family of Lawrence well, even from many years before.

Her eyes, most of all.

They came from Dublin, with a small son and a second on the way. He had baptized the newborn. Jack managed to make him show the baptismal registry of the parish. And here he is, Thomas Edward, son of Thomas Robert Lawrence and Sarah Maden Lawrence, married at St. Peter’s Church in Dublin in 1884. The old priest remembered a man about forty and a small, energetic woman, with a penetrating look. *Her eyes, most of all, were bright blue, the color of angels’ eyes on the rose windows of cathedrals.* The family remained in town a little more than a year, then they moved somewhere else.

On the train to Liverpool and later on the ferry to Belfast, Jack had planned the next stage of the research.

He rang the bell on Warneford Road and when the door opened, Janie Moore welcomed him with a kiss on the cheek. She noticed the suitcases, and looked at him shocked.

He forestalled the question.

“I’ve left the room at college.”

Her face brightened, but she quickly repressed the smile.

“Aren’t you pleased?”

She led him to the living room and handed him a letter. Sitting on the sofa, Jack skimmed it in a hurry. It was an injunction for eviction.

“It arrived three days ago. I’m sorry, Jack.

He folded up the paper and smiled.

“We’ll find another place. Big enough for all three of us.”

“Four,” she corrected him.

Faking a series of coughs, she went to open the glass door to the backyard. A black and furry creature scampered inside breathless and rushed to sniff Jack’s feet. When he slipped his muzzle between his legs, he drew back, trying to get away from him. That resulted in a hand drenched with dribble.

“Maureen wanted him at all cost. His name is Max.”

She called the dog and pushed him out into the small garden in the back.

Jack went into the bathroom and washed away the dog smell and the tiredness of the trip. He stared in the mirror for a long time, feeling the presence of a crack, without being able to identify it. He realised it was not the glass surface: that face was deformed by something imperceptible.

He had been clever. Better than a detective in those popular serial thrillers. The discovery in Dublin was to be kept tight. Unexpectedly, he found himself a part of a mystery, shared by a small circle of people, a small discreet clan that had been hiding for years. He had found it and this gave him an unexpected strength. He saw himself again in front of the parochial registry of St. Peter’s Church, while searching for the matrimonial act that he would not find. Slowly leafing through the yellowed pages of 1884, a hunch formed in his mind, always getting stronger, explosive. Once the last page was turned, the confirmation was there, in front of him, more solid than a column of granite. To be sure, he had also consulted the registry of the year before and the year after. No Lawrence had surfaced from those elegant scribbles. Thomas and Sarah had never been married in that church. Why had they stated this falsehood at the baptism of their second-born? The answer grew out, lapidary, like a boulder at the edge of the field of vision that we had to strive to not see. Vicar O’Brien was too young to remember thirty-five years-old facts. He had been kind, but he did not have other information to offer.

Only on the train to Belfast, did Jack let his mind free to conjecture. One does not lie on the day of the baptism of a child. Unless there is a really valid reason, something that could compromise the sacrament itself, the social acceptance. Jack knew something about it, for two

years he had challenged the prejudices of family and friends. He knew how hard it was to live outside the accepted habits. He knew how much easier it was to lie. Even to a priest.

He came out of the bathroom still in deep thought and found her seated on the sofa, the relaxed demeanor, the vague expression, the light that gilded her gathered hair.

“Come here. Lie down.”

For a moment Jack held back, then obeyed grudgingly. He laid his head on her lap and let her stroke his hair. He closed his eyes and imagined again that they were his mother’s fingers, a long time ago, the muscles relaxed, the perception of the body that sank on the cushions and in the soft fabric of the skirt.

“Relax. Later you will tell me everything.”

He tried to say something but she shushed him with a finger to her lips.

“Later.”

35. Eddie Marsh

The steward looked him up and down. It was evident that he was judging his clothes to be inappropriate. The prewar cut of the jacket, the woollen tie badly ironed, no overcoat, nor hat. But he was on the guest list of one of the honourable members, the personal Secretary of the Minister of War, and this was enough to make him incline his head and invite him to enter. They walked silently along the velvet runner that led into the great hall, where portraits of founding members of the club were sternly watching the new members. The light entered from three large windows on the same wall, the room smelled of books and tobacco.

The steward pointed to the corner at the end of the hall, where a middle-aged man was sitting alone, his face partly covered by a newspaper, which he folded when he noticed the guest approaching towards him. He stood up and greeted him slightly smiling.

"My dear Lawrence."

A light handshake. Edward Marsh was spruced up as always. The uniformity of the pinstripe was interrupted in some ways that, without being showy, revealed a certain taste. The small, silver tie pin, the beige gaiters with horn buttons, the ring of the Masonic Lodge on his left little finger. Seated facing each other, the two men formed a sharp contrast.

The scene had hardly distracted the few present members from the evening's editions, and they were already turning to the reading and their cigars.

"Make yourself comfortable. A glass of port?" asked Marsh. "Ah, yes, you're a teetotaler. Perhaps some tea?"

Ned sat facing him.

"Nothing, thanks."

"The usual ascetic, eh? Thank you, Samuels." An elegant gesture dismissed the steward. "So, how are things in old Oxford? Does Hogarth still take out that fat cur?"

"Oh, every morning. Now and then, to tell you the truth, I do that."

"You must absolutely give him my regards. I heard that Robert Graves has become a father for the second time. A boy, right?"

"Yes. He sends you his regards."

"Congratulate him and tell him that I'm waiting for his new poems. I hope he comes to visit me, sooner or later, if his health allows him. By the way . . ." he handed him a bound book: *Poems* by Wilfred Owen.

"Thanks."

"Siegfried Sassoon has edited the collection, God bless him. Did you know that he has returned from the United States? Rather tired apparently. Have you ever thought of going to America? After Lowell Thomas's success you would make tons of money."

"Is this an elegant way to suggest to me to leave?"

Marsh's smile suddenly cracked.

"Oh, no, far from it. By the way thanks for coming."

"What is the invitation for?"

Marsh played with his pocket watch chain.

“I think you can imagine why, and I would like you to keep in mind that we’re not here in an official position. We’re only two friends who are chatting at the club.”

“Very well.”

Marsh leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. He drew from the inside pocket of his jacket a silver cigarette case and started to offer him one, but he checked himself, remembering that T. E. did not smoke. He inserted one in a black cigarette holder and lit it. For a few seconds he let the smoke come between them, observing the other from behind the spirals. Ned had the feeling that he was wondering about him, that he had a question he could not ask. Or perhaps he was looking for a cue to begin. From a slight movement of his body, he was able to tell the exact moment he resumed talking.

“I’ve read your articles in *The Sunday Times*. Rather merciless towards us. Yet, very wise, I must admit.”

“Thank you.”

“I appreciated less your *boutade* with Sir Henry Wilson at the wedding reception of Lord Ashton’s daughter. Forgive me, but word gets around.”

“I’ve spoken the truth. From the face he has made it’s clear that he must not be used to hear it often.”

Marsh’s eyebrows rose until they became two points of arrows.

“Come on, he is still the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. You weren’t polite to tell him that we should be thrown out of Turkey, Mesopotamia, and Persia.”

“It wasn’t my intention to be polite.”

Marsh’s smile became tighter.

“Out of curiosity, have you left out India purposely or was it forgetfulness?”

The sarcasm was out of place. He had not come here to beat around the bush.

“I’m pleased that you still have the desire to be ironical, Marsh, after having killed ten thousand Arabs in one summer and having unified the Sunnis and Shiites against us. Not even the Turks had succeeded in doing as much. And, incidentally, for the blood spilled in India we will pay with interest in the years to come. For this we have to thank the myopia of Lloyd George and old owls like Sir Henry.”

Marsh took the blow in style, tapping the cigarette elegantly on the edge of the ash tray.

“I admit that inside the Cabinet there are different shades of thoughts regarding the situation in the Middle East.”

An evasive tone. He was trying to provoke him, to push him to disclose his cards. He might as well please and scratch Marsh’s courtesy mask.

“Having a permanent presence in Palestine already cost eight million sterling pounds and we spent thirty-three to curb the Revolt in Mesopotamia. We have ninety thousand men engaged in the field and we have succeeded only in transforming every little boy who can hold a gun into a rebel. Not to mention the garrisons that we maintain in Turkey, Persia, and Ireland. With India in turmoil we can’t ever move regiments across the Persian Gulf.”

Marsh did not bat an eyelash.

“It’s evident you have good spies.”

“Unfortunately, the listeners are missing.”

“What would you say if I told you that you found one?”

“You?”

“Oh, I don’t count for much. My boss has shown a certain interest, on the other hand.”

Ned allowed himself a few seconds to register the information.

“Churchill? Is it to him that I owe this meeting?”

Marsh nodded.

“Precisely.”

This time he remained silent.

“There’s no escaping the accounts, it’s true,” continued Marsh. “We can’t afford current military engagement anymore in so vast a front. To increase tax burden is out of the question, it would jeopardize the government. Churchill understood it and this puts him one step ahead of the others. He is trying to convince Lloyd George to approve a plan of retreat from Baghdad and eastern Syria, but he faces resistance from the Army.”

“What plan?”

Marsh kept on staring.

“There are different hypotheses on the table. But time is of the essence. It’s for this that Churchill would like to listen to your proposal. Assuming you’ve got one.”

They had reached the point. There was no need to hesitate.

“There’s only one way to exit honourably. But we can’t do anything without the consent of Lloyd George.”

Marsh put out his cigarette with a fine-mannered gesture.

“Let’s hypothesize for a moment that his consent will arrive.”

“A limited mandate or carte blanche?”

“The support of the Secretary of State for the Colonies would be sufficient?”

“Certainly.”

“Proceed.”

“We have to create autonomous states in all of the area,” said Ned. “They will be supported by the administration until they’re able to stand on their own feet. Their armies and their police will need to be trained. As they learn, we will disengage our quota. The operation can take less than a year, but we need to move quickly. In six months it could be too late.”

“Are you truly convinced that the Arabs can govern themselves alone?”

“Yes, if we choose the right leaders and have them elected with a popular mandate. For this, charismatic leaders would be useful, those who took part in the liberation struggle but are not compromised with the colonial administration.”

Marsh rested his crossed fingers on his belly.

“I suppose that you want to suggest some.”

“The sons of Hussein from Mecca. Above all, Feisal. We’ve let the French chase him out of Damascus without saying a word. He needs to be recompensed. He’s the man we need in Baghdad.”

He watched Marsh light another cigarette. He was taking his time, a good sign.

“This plan leaves out a particular, not irrelevant, issue. The oil. The subsoil throughout those parts is rich and, according to many, it will be the strategic resource of the future. In the Parliament the oil camp is the major obstacle for Churchill.”

The old fox had kept the main objection to the last. Not for nothing he had survived in a couple of governments and still could accompany young, handsome poets.

“That’s the desert, Marsh, I know it well. Oil is neither edible nor drinkable. The new states will always need someone to sell it to in order to acquire what they need, and if we give them their independence, they will be our major allies and business partners. Britain has to run this risk. How do you think we can exploit the oil deposits if the whole region sinks into chaos?”

Marsh allowed himself a little smile.

“And to think that some of the old owls, as you call them, doubt your patriotism. I seem to hear them: They’ll say you’re looking for an opportunity to return on stage.”

“Is it important?”

“No, but believe me, the corridors of Whitehall are more deceitful than the labyrinth of Knossos.”

“Would you relate the plan to Churchill?”

“Yes. Obviously if he would support the project, you would be willing to contact Feisal to convince him.”

“I’m the only one who can do that. But on one condition.”

Marsh relaxed in the armchair.

“I’m listening.”

“That Hogarth and Curtis be part of the group.”

Marsh nodded.

“We’ll consider it. However, you’ll make things easier for us if you don’t commit body and soul to irritate the establishment. When those people want to crush you, they don’t hesitate to hit below the belt.”

A shrug.

“Let them do it. I have served the country better than many others.”

Marsh looked at him again with that ambiguous face that hid an unasked question.

“Come on, Lawrence, even Achilles had a weak point. Public virtues may not be enough to protect our private vices. If Churchill decides to put you back in the game, you will have to be unassailable. Learn from yours truly.”

That friendly look made him nervous.

“You’re way off, Marsh.”

“I hope so, my friend. I sincerely hope so. Are you sure you won’t have a cup of tea?”

“No thanks. I’m going back to Oxford.” He stood up, the other followed suit. “I’ll wait for news from you.”

They shook hands.

“You won’t wait too long, you’ll see.”

He retraced his steps back across the room in a hurry, feeling Marsh’s gaze on his neck until he passed through the door.

36. Leeds

Ronald measured the room in a few steps. It was narrow and bare. Although summer was over and the nights were no longer mild, he was feeling suffocated. He opened the window, hoping that this made him want to go out, but the profiles of the buildings were gloomy, darker than the night that enveloped them. The small path below stretched beyond the curve, where the suburb faded into a network of roads, between murky huts and shabby fields. That big grey zone, neither part of the city nor the country, reminded one of No Man's Land, covered with every kind of stilt: contorted aluminium sheets, rusted dustbins, old tires.

Industrial cities were horrifying to him, they had a tendency to expand, expelling their waste and spreading it in the surrounding area. Until they too could be affected by the building boom and incorporated into the foundations of new neighbourhoods and districts. The countryside was dying, covered with scrap iron and garbage, while the landscape was forever changing, the soil contaminated, dried out by sewage and fuel-oil combustion. An attack that was routing nature and delivering the land to the industrial age.

He missed Oxford, the opportunity of going for a walk across the fields, beyond the city. He missed the Botanical Garden and his old leafy friend, the light infiltrating through the rose windows, the smell of ancient wood. Most of all, he missed Edith and John. She had been clear: She would no longer accept makeshift arrangements, that period was over, now she wanted a house where she can raise children, a place where it was possible to plant bulbs and watch them sprout in the following spring. She wanted to be happy. For the moment his expedition to the north, in search of fortune, would remain solitary and he would become a member of the crowd of weekend commuters.

Ronald knew that Edith was right. The pregnancy was now almost over and worries were beginning. An interior voice repeated to him that he should not have been in that claustrophobic little room, but by the side of his wife, and was forcing him to cling to the conviction that had brought him there to a young, dynamic university, open to new ideas. A course had just been created for students of Anglo-Saxon literature and Middle English. The head of the Department of Languages wanted the study plan set on solid philological bases. The task of setting up a program had been assigned to him. Consideration, respect, leeway. What more could one want?

One's own family. He told himself it was just a matter of time, time necessary to find stable accommodation for all of them. But when?

He resumed walking, from the window to the wardrobe and back again, four steps and a half each way, while anxiety was mounting in his chest. He remembered all too well that sensation of estrangement and abandonment, and he cursed it. Feeling far from everything you love, a total absence of intimacy with voices, presences, objects. It had been like that in the trenches and later in sanitariums, in a myriad of places where the military bureaucracy had thrown him before the war ended. He knew the symptoms. Tachycardia, laboured breath, inability to focus. He grasped the knob, opened the door, closed it, washed his face in the washbasin, he was hot, he took off his cardigan and shirt, remained in his vest, shivered, increasingly tense. He was tempted to hide under the covers and come out only when the light of day had made the world appear less gloomy and people's faces had cheered up his solitude. Sleeping was out of the question, he would not succeed at this. He was frightened by the thought of finding himself again alone, in the dark, without the presence and the breath of anyone else.

He had to shift his thoughts faraway from here, but also from Edith and John.

His eyes fell on old notebooks set on the only shelf. For some reasons he had brought them with him. He took hold of one and opened it to the first page. He started reading with eagerness, then more slowly. As soon as he proceeded, he realised he was recovering self-control. The story was about Tùrin Turambar, one of the first that he had drafted. The decision to abandon the stories had stopped him from rereading it. It was strange that he had to get here to have the chance to do it. He stretched on the bed. Soon the world before the world briefly replaced the walls of the room, and Ronald found himself between valleys and mountains, at the time when the evil demon Melkor was taking his revenge on the gods, taking advantage of the weakness and the divisions among the creatures of the Earth. He retraced the exploits of Tùrin, cousin of that Tuor who would bring the survivors to safety from the ruins of Gondolin. A destiny more nefarious accompanied him in the hopeless struggle to the bitter end against the hidden power. He waged it along with a band of marauders, unaware of the curse that loomed over his destiny and that of those he loved. Every victory, every killed enemy, only brought Tùrin closer to ruin. Father, mother, sister, allies, even his most loyal friend, all will be overwhelmed by his better intentions and blindness. And when at last the hero would open his eyes and understand, like Oedipus he could not have but turned the force against himself, to punish himself for every impiety committed.

It was the story of a failure implicit in the sin itself of imagining to be "Turambar," Master of Fate. As if the thread of fate was not pulled by a greater, unfathomable will.

He realised that the reading had had the cathartic effect of a prayer. He returned to the window; outside, the night had advanced and it had become even darker. He searched for the stars, but there was no trace of them. He lay down again and little by little he slipped into a drowsy state crowded with images.

There was a man bound hand and foot to a tree. Dark and massive shapes were on him, speaking in an abstruse, guttural language, of which he seemed to recognize some familiar sounds. They were goading the prisoner with knives, snatching from him tight-lipped laments.

The cackling laughs were interrupted at once, when one of them turned. Serpentine eyes, a monstrous face, a snout that sniffed the air. Ronald crouched, and when he turned to peep at them, they had moved away. Enough for him to crawl towards the captive. He reached him and called him by name.

Tùrin . . . Tùrin . . .

He seemed lifeless. He dragged him away, beyond the reach of the jailors. With the blade that he found in his fist he cut off the rope around his wrists, then he went to his legs and at that moment the man moaned, opened his eyes, and stared at him. They were bright blue. After recognizing him, he gave a start. He jumped at his throat, his face deformed by anger, his blond fringes whipping his forehead. Ronald would have liked to talk, but he was choking. In a last, desperate effort, he jumped up and kicked away the sheet that stopped him from breathing. He found himself sitting on the bed, out of breath, oppressed by the clear perception that someone had been in the room while he was sleeping.

He investigated the place, but everything was as he had left it. From the street came the chatter of sparrows. His restlessness diminished. With a tired gesture he picked up the notebook from the floor and put it back on the shelf.

37. Mad Jack

"Nineteen times at the dentist. Nineteen! What a nightmare."

While he was listening to him, Robert wondered how Siegfried could maintain a *fin-de-siècle* air without being reduced into a caricature of himself. He would stop half an inch before straying into farce, with a joke, often playing with his fame as a soldier *maudit*. Sass, the war hero. Sass, who had thrown the military cross into the river and sent his protest to the High State. Sass, who for one whole night was going around in No Man's Land, hunting Germans, to vindicate the death of his young Patroclus. Sass, called "Mad Jack," who attacked a German trench with hand grenades all by himself. On returning to his side, a diligent English sentinel had mistaken him for an enemy, sending him to the hospital with a scratch wound on his head. A matter of millimetres and together with Wilfred Owen they would be mourning his loss too. Nichols was convinced that it was a conspiracy of the Command to get rid of a difficult officer, but Robert had always found the hypothesis crazy, and the fact that Nichols was claiming it gave even less evidence to it.

He again poured beer in the glasses, hoping that there was enough in reserve. People from all the neighbourhood had come, even from Oxford. Thanks to the newspapers which had given the news of the opening with the picturesque title: *A Shop on Parnassus.*

It was difficult to believe. He was becoming a shopkeeper. A poet shopkeeper. A socialist shopkeeper. Always better than being under a master. After he left the Army he had sworn to himself that he would never again be dependent on anybody.

Anyway Nancy had studied a method to sidestep the ethical contradiction. She was rather excited while she was explaining her strategy of cost redistribution.

"It's very simple, Robert. We list the prices on a sliding scale. We offer discounts on all the goods for the housewives of Wootton. For the residents of Boar's Hill villas we raise the price ten percent."

To each according to his need, from each according to his ability.

Robert had something to say about that applied Marxism, but he remained silent. He had months of irregular attendance to catch up and after all, if the enterprise worked they would come out of economic hardship.

He imagined the face his father must have made. First a smile at the thought that his son had found work, then the long face, thinking of him in the shopkeeper's shoes instead of the scholar's. His paradoxical contribution to the business had been a poem of encouragement.

Everything was happening very fast, the shop had sprouted like a mushroom on a hill, decorated with Celtic designs by Nancy, filled with merchandise acquired on credit. Robert wondered if it would be the end of family troubles or their ultimate aggravation. It was clear that only a few of the guests realised his dilemma. They were interpreting that venture as an eccentric performance. The poets' shop. An amusing thing, great for newspapers.

Jenny had a tiny apron on that made her look like Carroll's Alice. Nancy's humour broke down when she found out that the nanny had given her a slice of cake in excess of what she had said.

"Margaret has again stuffed Jenny. I don't want that baby to learn that she can get everything by making eyes at adults. What kind of a woman do you want her to become?"

Robert burst out laughing in her face and for a little while she ignored him, focusing on her guests.

Little David smiled to whoever peered over the cradle, until the confusion put him to sleep. The perfect defensive strategy, thought Robert with envy, as he was moving through the shop that smelled of wood and fresh varnish, offering just baked biscuits. A voice in his head kept saying the same words: "*I'm a writer . . . I'm a writer . . .*"

At the centre of the largest crowd, Siegfried Sassoon, fresh from his *rentrée* from the United States, was holding court telling anecdotes about Americans. When the chatter faded and the guests went to refuel with food and drink, Robert decided to take the opportunity and chat with him in peace and quiet. He found him colder than usual, a sign that something was bothering him. They perched on two stools and when Siegfried said, without adding anything else, that he had read *Country Sentiment*, Robert understood everything. To let him unload, it was enough to provoke him with a joke.

"Too little war for your taste?"

The other responded seriously. He said he thought it was an attempt to go somewhere else, but without knowing where. They had not even started to deal with what they had been through, and they would not get rid of it so easily.

"Look at Ed." He pointed to Edmund Blunden, seated with a glass in hand, distracted, dreaming, lost somewhere else too big for his timidity. It was clear that he was not listening to the other guests' conversations. His wife was answering questions for both, allowing him to stay hidden behind a tenuous smile. "He knows that the last thing he'll see before he dies is a group of infantrymen marching in No Man's Land. There's nothing that he can do to avoid it. He can only write to the best of his abilities. Try to narrate it, if he can. He's much more honest with himself than the two of us, who are claiming something, a sort of compensation from life."

Robert felt the answer rising from his stomach.

"The truth, Sass, is that being forced to represent the war, we'll end up aestheticizing it."

"Echoes of Nancy Nicholson."

"It's what I think."

"But it's not what you feel. The fact that *Country Sentiment* wasn't a bestseller speaks volumes."

A low hit from a sporting man like Siegfried. Robert said that he could not judge a book of poems on the basis of its commercial success.

“Come on, Robert, are you playing the role of the misunderstood writer? Not you. It’s the legal aid of the mediocre.”

“You’re afraid to look past.”

Siegfried stayed silent for a few seconds, and when he responded he let the words slip out of his mouth, as if by accident.

“I try, believe me, but what I see is terribly familiar. Again ruin and those infantrymen in line. I see an eighteen-year-old German dead in a hole and his face becomes David’s.” He held back. “By the way, it’s nice that you have chosen his name for your son.”

He said this with feeling. Robert was silent, not sure of the response that he would have given, not having thought at all of the coincidence. He could not rule out that the idea of naming the little one involved a kind of homage. To a fallen friend, even before the love of hoplites. When David had been shot in the throat, Siegfried was transformed into an angel of death. So Mad Jack was born, the regiment’s legend. Later, only Wilfred could have taken that place in his heart, but his days too were numbered, like the poems he would write. Robert recalled the Scottish sanitarium where they had met him, in ’17, and the long chats with Dr. Rivers, to whom he had said: “Take him in, not me,” allowing Siegfried to escape court martial this way. For Sass it had been little more than a short vacation, but up there he had been looked after as a son by a man who could understand what he had been through. Later he had wanted to return to the trenches. Wilfred would follow him shortly thereafter, only to die the last week of the war. Nothing had remained for Siegfried to do but to print his memories.

At that moment T. E. appeared at the door. He barely had time to wave at them in greeting before being stopped by Nichols, who wanted to introduce to him John Masefield and his spouse.

“Here’s our hero,” said Siegfried. “Has he finally written his book?”

“Yes, but he doesn’t allow anyone to read it. There are publishers who would pay him in gold.”

Siegfried sipped his beer, musing.

“Either he’s a milksop or he hasn’t written the whole truth.”

“Actually, I think he likes to be wrapped in mystery,” Robert commented.

The other looked askance at him.

“Maybe he could expect some understanding from our side. There’s a ton of stories about him, he must be under a terrible pressure. Someone says that down there he was captured by the Turks and tortured. Then there’s another story, I’ve overheard it at an officers’ dinner when I was serving in Palestine. Lord Kensington hinted at a massacre of prisoners executed by Feisal’s irregulars. Probably one of the many rumours spread to convince the Turkish soldiers to surrender, rather than be subjects of the Arabs’ reprisal. However, I remember that it caused a certain sensation. To the great satisfaction of that sadist Kensington, obviously.”

He did not say anything else because T. E. had managed to free himself and was catching up with them.

"I bring greetings from Eddie Marsh."

"How is he?"

"Splendid, I'd say. He wants to introduce me to Winston Churchill."

Siegfried sniggered.

"The one and only Eddie. When it was my turn, Churchill tried to convince me that war is a natural human activity. Like gardening, nothing less."

"As far as the British are concerned, he perhaps isn't totally wrong," commented T. E.

Robert clicked his tongue.

"None of that, fighting and farming are incompatible activities, consecrated to conflicting gods, since the dawn of time."

"And not knowing to which of the two gods; at the moment you have chosen a third way: commerce," Siegfried teased him. "Good for you."

Robert ignored him and turned to T. E.

"Siegfried was wondering when we can read your book."

"I don't really know. Sometimes it seems to me that I've written a ton of rubbish." He smiled. "As if I had told a dream. When I reread it I have to convince myself that it's my story and not another's."

"Luckily we don't remain always the same to ourselves," Robert said.

"If I could I would write poems like yours," added T. E. "By the way, Marsh gave me the collection of Wilfred Owen. I found it excellent. I think that he succeeded in finding *le mot juste.*"

Siegfried looked at the bottom of the glass that he was holding in his hand, as if he had to read something in it.

"Oh, he, yes." His eyebrows furrowed, he seemed to want to focus on a thought. "In his last letter he described to me the death of a fellow soldier. That young man remained for half an hour with his bloody head on his shoulder, before expiring. Wilfred couldn't do anything else but watch him die, thinking of the only way that he would have had to manage that event. To tell it. Using poetry to express the truth. Not dry news, but the reality of one who sees life put out in the eyes of a comrade. Of one he cradled the last half hour of his life, like a baby in a mother's womb. Well, I don't know what you think of it, but I think it takes guts to do it."

He stopped. Robert looked at T. E. The blue of his eyes was black as night, his mouth a line. A few seconds passed before an understanding smile brought back normalcy to his face, but without entirely cancelling that shadow.

T. E. lifted the glass of cider.

“To Wilfred Owen.”

The two friends followed suit with their mugs.

“To Wilfred.”

38. Miss Heuwett

The residential suburb was a series of identical streets. Jack checked the signs on the streets, while the bicycle was spinning straight on Woodstock road, rising above splashes every time the paths ploughed through puddles of rain.

He slowed down when he read the sign of Polstead Road. He turned left and the brakes squeaked in the silent street. He left the bicycle against a tree in front of No. 2. A two-storey red brick house, with a small front yard and probably a garden in the back.

A quick investigation at the Town Hall was enough to find out where the Lawrence family has been residing since 1896. Mr. Thomas Robert Lawrence, head of the family, had died a little over a year ago.

Jack felt his stomach tighten with excitement. If his presuppositions were correct, these ordinary walls kept a secret for a quarter of a century. He realised that he did not know what to

do with the truth, but it was a false problem, finding it was a scored point against fate. His personal quest, as he had started to call it to himself.

One could hear the droplets fall from the trees and the twittering of the hedge sparrows who were resuming their activity after the rain. He tried to catch sight of something beyond the glass windows, but the house appeared uninhabited. He was in no hurry, he could take it easy. It was the first free morning after many days, an escape from domestic duties and looking for a new living arrangement for Janie, Maureen, himself, and furry Max.

He walked under the trees, up until the end of the street, then came back on the other side. When he was in front of the house, he stopped. A step into the yard, two, he slid near the door, skipping over the stairs. There was a small side door, which led into the back garden. The green paint was chipped. He only had to push the handle, which turned without any creak, and he was looking out on the garden, staying close to the outside wall so as not to be seen from the rear windows. He was in a blind spot, from where he could see and not be seen. A small lawn, a metal table and chair, a flower bed. A flat stone path led to a cottage at the end of the property.

At that moment he saw himself from the outside and felt ridiculous. What was he trying to do? Get into the house by breaking through the window? To look for what? Or perhaps he would ring the door bell and ask Mrs. Lawrence to show him her marriage certificate? He could hardly control his panic, turned back to the front and then into the street in a hurry. Now it seemed like his steps were like those of an elephant.

A voice made him jump like a thief.

“Do you want to see the lady or her son?”

A marked accent, from an old woman who looked over from the nearby gate. It was not the time to say anything.

“You’re not an errand boy.”

Jack did not know how to interpret her dismissive tone.

“No. A journalist.”

“Ah,” remarked the woman. “From what newspaper?”

He did not know if she saw him enter the Lawrence garden. The die was cast. Maybe she would be impressed and let him go.

“*Oxford Mail*.”

“It’s about little Ned Lawrence, right?”

“You mean Colonel Lawrence?”

“I just can’t bring myself to call him so. I’ve watched him grow up. In the backyard with his brothers.” Jack realised that the woman was trying to attract his attention and everything seemed clear to him. “Anyway they aren’t home,” she added. “Neither the lady nor the sons.”

Jack was relieved.

“I’ll come back later.”

“Better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

He was about to leave, when a thought flashed in his mind. She was still leaning on the gate and looking at him idiotically, as if expecting an answer to an unasked question.

Jack smiled at her.

“Maybe you could help me.”

She scrutinized him for a few seconds.

“You’ll put it in the newspaper?”

“I’ve got to write an article.”

“I mean my name. You’ll put it in the newspaper?”

He did not know the proper response.

“At your discretion. As you prefer.”

She looked around indifferently, then she moved to the side.

“It’s spelled with two “t’s.” Heuwett. Dora Heuwett.

She stretched a wrinkled hand towards him.

“Five boys. My sister has had three and has lost her health, you know? But hers, Sarah Lawrence knew how to keep them in line. A small woman and as hard as a rock, if you know what I mean. And to think that life has not spared her anything. The war took away two sons, and the Spanish Fever killed her husband, just last year. Don’t think that she lost her spirit. She has strong faith, and this gives her strength. It’s a good thing to have faith, don’t you think?”

Jack touched the cup placed before him. Miss Heuwett had dusted it before pouring the hot liquid. It must have belonged to a formal set, and she did not look to be a person who receives many visitors.

“I’m afraid I’m not a believer, Miss Heuwett.”

“Oh.” The woman put her hand on her mouth. “I’m so sorry for you.” She fidgeted with a tin of milk from the cupboard until she managed to lift the cover and show him the contents. Jack accepted a biscuit that he placed on his small dish. The kitchen was cozy. Dora Heuwett apologized for not being able to receive him in the drawing-room, but she was changing the wallpaper and the room was in disarray. Actually, when he had passed by the door, Jack had not noticed any signs of work going on, only old-fashioned furniture and a stale smell.

“I’m very sorry for Will and Frank,” said Miss Heuwett. “They were the most handsome. Will, most of all, a big lad, tall and blond . . .” She remained hanging on to memories, her dreaming eyes turned to the past.

Jack sipped the tea and almost burned his palate. It was hot. He tested the biscuit, but it was like biting into a rock, and he stopped without being noticed.

“Sometimes,” continued Miss Heuwett, “I baked biscuits for them. They were a small army. A small well-mannered army. If the mother found out they weren’t behaving . . . well, I think that she would have set them right.” She mimicked the blows with her hand. “Ned was the more alert. Short and thin like his mother, the same eyes, the same fortitude. One time, he must have been nine or ten years old, he was sitting right where you are, young man,” Miss Heuwett leaned over the table. “He overturned a boiling hot cup of tea over his leg and did not let out a single cry. Not even an ‘Ah.’ He clenched his fists and apologized. You understand? He was mortified, certainly burnt, but he remained seated, composed, gritting his teeth.”

Jack imagined the scene and looked at his thigh as if expecting a stain to appear on his trousers. He was feeling embarrassed, aware of being transformed into a thief of memories, and of having done much more than taking two steps into others’ privacy.

“Do you know by chance where they lived before moving here?”

Miss Heuwett sighed and shook her head.

“One time they mentioned an island in the Channel. More than that I wouldn’t know. They weren’t very extrovert, you know. Always cordial, but rather reserved, understand? Sarah Lawrence is surely Scottish, her accent is unmistakable. I know because my uncle Reginald was Scottish. He drank like a fish, may he rest in peace. Not Sarah Lawrence, obviously,” she moved her finger and then pointed towards the window. “There was never any alcohol going round in that house. And never a bad word or a vulgar gesture, I don’t know if I explain myself. Otherwise . . .” again that gesture with her hand.

“What kind of a person was Mr. Lawrence?”

The expression on the woman’s face melted.

“Oh, a distinct Irishman. The manners of a grand gentleman. Always jovial, well-mannered. Unique. They’re of all colours nowadays: husbands lost behind the bottle, bad companions, women and children sent to the hospital . . . It takes a lot of luck to find a good man. All in all, I don’t regret not being married, you know?”

“Did Mr. Lawrence have any occupation, a job?”

Miss Heuwett shook her head once again.

“Frankly, he didn’t give the appearance of one who ever worked. It was evident by looking at how he treated craftsmen and porters. I think he had a property in Ireland. A revenue, understand? Because a couple of times in a year he would go there to take care of it, I think.” She stopped, seemingly hesitating, then resumed: “A working person doesn’t have time to waste on

cameras, don't you agree? While he spent hours with them. Sometimes he mounted the apparatus in the garden and took photos of his sons. He loved them very much. Even though I don't think he succeeded in passing on his passion. Except to Ned. He liked it quite a lot. I remember one summer Ned took a ton of photos of his foreign guests. And also of his friend Miss Laurie. I think she was the only girl who was allowed to visit." She sighed. "I could swear that they would marry, instead . . ." She did not finish the sentence, feigning modesty.

"You said that Mr. Lawrence died of the Spanish Fever?"

"Yes. I felt very sad, you know? He was a good man, in my humble opinion. Too much, perhaps." The woman bit her lip. "Rest in peace," she quickly added.

"What do you mean by 'too much,' if I may ask?"

"Oh, well, I don't mean anything bad. Maybe he was a little, how to say, amiable." She leaned out on the table. "I wouldn't want to seem forward, but I've always had the impression the he wasn't the head of the family, there inside," pointing again to the window.

"I see."

Jack smiled at her. It seemed that Miss Heuwett liked to engage in a pragmatic conversation, in which she sang her neighbours' praises, yet leave something unsaid, a "but" as perceived from her shifty eyes. He bet that inside her there was a little battle going on between courtesy and a wish to give in to gossip. He thought that she was uncertain what his response would be, so he decided to help her without scaring her. He said that the tea was excellent and she hurried to fill the cup again to the rim.

"I guess they enjoyed much esteem in this area."

She looked away.

"Absolutely. If you don't count the usual malice."

Jack took on the most innocent air he was capable of, and kept looking at her waiting for her to continue. When she spoke again, Dora Heuwett had lowered her voice.

"It's rare to meet someone who never mentions his relatives or the places where he grew up, don't you agree? Everyone speaks about them continually, but not the Lawrences. I think this is what generates a certain mistrust in the neighbourhood. They give the impression of being, how to say, reticent. That there's something out of place, here. I wouldn't want ever to disrespect them having said this, obviously."

"Obviously," repeated Jack.

Dora Heuwett was a cleverer investigator than he. She did not need to go to Ireland to prove the suspicion that he came with here. Maybe because she had them under her eyes for twenty-five years. A lot of time for the secret not to leak out. Jack repeated to himself that it wasn't possible. Something had to surface, always surfaces. Oxford wasn't really different from Belfast, in this. The practices of a good neighbourhood required minding their own business, in order to be better able to meddle with the lives of others. One only needed the right cue.

“And the malicious, what do they say?”

He saw her struggling again with herself and finally giving in to the temptation. She came closer and touched his arm.

“Someone says that in Ireland Mr. Lawrence did not have only property but also a *past*.”

Jack felt his heart beating faster. He would have wanted to laugh.

“You understand?” she added with a secretive air. “Another family. And that he would go there to visit them periodically.” She shook her head forcefully. “Obviously, I’ve never given credit to this gossip.”

“Obviously,” he smiled at her.

He saw that she was embarrassed, maybe she realised that she went too far. It was time to change the conversation.

“Tell me about Ned.”

Miss Heuwett was quickly relieved.

“Certainly. I can say that I’m not astonished that he’s become . . .” she did not know how to explain her thought, “well, what he had become. As a boy he had many hobbies. He used to go around the countryside to look for buried treasures. Often he would return home with ancient pottery, rusty relics. He was always curious, since he was little. When he left on his journeys I was not surprised. He would always travel in his imagination and he was fascinated by exotic languages. I remember that he tried to speak Arabic with his foreign guests.”

“Arab guests?”

“Well, I guess so. He had brought them along on one of his trips. It was in the summer of ’13 it seems, or perhaps it was the ’14? No, it must have been the ’13. They were two, a man and a boy. They slept in the cottage at the end of the garden. You know, his father had it built specially for him, so he could study in peace. It was his little kingdom. One time I heard them splitting their sides laughing and I looked out of the window above. Ned was teaching him how to ride a bicycle. From the way they were laughing I think that they had never seen one. Ned is like that, you know? He likes to amaze. He is timid, but at heart he has always been an ambitious boy. He took a lot of photos of them. He even taught the boy how to use that device.” She sighed again. “It was the last summer of happiness, before the war.”

Jack let her talk more, without asking other questions. Miss Heuwett went on to give a summary of Ned Lawrence’s life with an ability above suspicion and a profusion of anecdotes about his domestic life. When he took his leave, he noticed that about an hour had passed. The last image he had of her was of her on the doorstep, her hand on the door, as she reminded him again that her family name was written with two “t’s”.

39. The Home Office

In a group of dromedaries, three frozen bundles cast a look at the group of small houses not too distant. Behind them stretched the tracks left by the rhythmic steps of the beasts, a path that goes backwards into the night, up to the camp of the previous evening.

To the early rising village dweller those lined-up shapes must appear like a magus king searching for a hut. They exchange with him a few words, a stretched arm indicates the direction, some more steps, then they make the animals crouch in front of a sleeping house. Only one enters, the others stay at the sides of the door. They do not appear to have weapons, but it is difficult to know what they are keeping under their mantles. In front of them a small crowd gathers, dark faces, sleep erased by curiosity.

When dawn begins to put out the stars one by one, the man comes out with his face uncovered. Someone recognizes him, a murmur carries his name from mouth to mouth, while they watch him climb back up in the saddle followed by others.

Someone will recount that that night the magi had truly passed through the village.

Someone else will say instead that it was the devil, accompanied by two demons. And, for who knows what miracle, he would cry.

Paddington! Station Paddington!

The first thing that came to focus were the droplets condensed at the edge of the window, then the glass itself, finally the stationmaster on the sidewalk shaking the cowbell to announce the end of the ride.

Ned roused himself from these remembrances and exited the compartment in a hurry. He reached the footboard where he was hit by the cold blowing under the big iron roofs. He raised the collar of his coat and went through the bustling passengers up to a taxi.

"Whitehall, please."

On the way he noticed crowded pubs, passersby who were hurrying home under the transparent light of the street lamps. The destiny of the Empire was not their business, they had other things to think about, the thousand ordinary worries which he had renounced willingly. He was coming back into the game, and a sharp emotion was taking hold of him again. He would try to fix it, to finish what he had started. He remembered that at the Museum Tolkien had quoted Professor Hogarth. *It is up to us to decide how to use the small creative force that we are endowed with.*

More prosaically, he was trying to save what is salvable and to redeem a friendship. That with the man who had given him a ring and the white mantle of a *sherif* of the desert, allowing him to become a star in the firmament. He did not hide the fact that his love for Feisal surpassed that for Great Britain, but he had a certain experience in making them coincide.

The summons had arrived sooner than expected. He was sure that after the recent events in Ireland, Churchill had other fish to fry. Three weeks ago, in Dublin, the British military had opened fire in a stadium full of people. Fourteen dead and sixty-five wounded. It was the answer to the killing of British agents by the IRA. The Empire was showing its angrier and more ferocious face. In the midst of the clamor, Churchill caught the opportunity to propose to the heads of the clandestine Irish government a truce and a negotiation. A hazardous yet savvy move, which put him under the light of pragmatism, when the executive he was part of did not know any longer what fish to catch, neither in Ireland nor in any other corner of the Empire. He had to admit that Churchill aroused his curiosity, he started to understand the influence he had over Eddie Marsh. It was evident that that man did not miss the larger picture, convinced that a practical solution for everything existed and that he was able to find it.

When he stepped down in front of the whitish mass of the Home Office, he looked up at the solid baroque building. It was gloomy and dirty. He remained looking at it for a few instants, before an icy gust convinced him to enter.

A greyish employee checked his summons and sent him to the second storey, where another person almost fell down in very formal apologies. He was very sorry, the minister had a conflict, and he asked him politely to wait in the antechamber. He pointed to a room at the end of the corridor, to which Ned walked down in slow steps, cushioned by a carpet. From a side salon came an agitated buzz, someone deep in conversation. Passing in front of the door, he slowed down enough to see three people seated at a table, paper and pen in hand. One of them looked up and saw Ned. He stopped talking, then disappeared beyond the doorframe.

Ned reached the antechamber and sat down. He let his eyes wander over the floral wallpaper, the velvet curtains, the paintings on the wall. He stood up to look at them closely. They were about episodes from military stories. The Spartans at Thermopylae. Nelson at Trafalgar. His eyes lingered over the details of the Battle of Balaclava. The mouths of the horses were wide open in a roar, their manes like flames in the wind. The sabre of Count Cardigan held the epicentre of the painting and pointed straight towards glory, represented as a girl. She was waiting for him beyond enemy lines, clothed only in a veil and a crown. The head of the Major General was wrapped with an aura of light. Yet there was something in his look that seemed to contradict the meaning of the painting. It was not easy to notice it, but looking closely, one would notice that the eyes were haunted, the scary eyes of a madman who was urging his men to run towards death. Is it possible that the artist wanted to suggest just that?

He shivered and for a moment the screams sounded again in his mind, screams of pure terror, blades that came down on the backs of fleeing men. Someone spurred on the attack, screaming in Arabic. He recognized his own voice.

“The Imperial Obtuseness.”

He gave a start and turned impulsively. A tall man, ears sticking out and square jaws, was studying the painting. He was the one who had seen him passing in front of the door.

The man pointed with his chin towards the canvas: “That’s how it should be titled.”

He had his hands in his trousers pockets, his tie loose, his look tired.

Ned did not say anything.

“Charges on horse against artillery, assaults by bayonets against machineguns. It’s the logic that filled the cemeteries in all Europe.”

This time Ned nodded.

“An outdated idea of war.”

“Right for a decrepit empire, reduced to shooting on civilians.”

Ned was about to ask him who he was, but the other spoke first.

“You’re Colonel Lawrence, right? I saw one of your photographs in the newspapers.”

Ned scrutinized that face as if he could recognize it. He was more or less his age, but he had signs of sleep deprivation on his face, and he seemed shaken, strained by an internal force in conflict with the world. His accent was unmistakable.

“Are you part of the Irish delegation?”

The other snorted.

“Yes. A prisoner here for three days.”

Ned sat down gently in an armchair, almost afraid to disturb the intimate atmosphere of the moment.

“War or peace?”

He asked him as if the question was most innocent.

The Irishman looked at him without embarrassment.

“What would you say? Better dishonourable peace or a suicidal war?”

“One can redeem oneself from dishonour,” said Ned, “From death, not.”

The answer seemed to stun him, he went to sit down facing him.

“Do you have any idea how much hatred is in the game?” He did not wait for an answer. “How do you shoot unarmed people? Fathers and sons who are watching the match?”

Once again, the screams, eyes that beg for pity, the mechanical crackles of machine guns, the shells that bounce on the ground. He felt his stomach tighten and he had to look down.

The other stretched forward. There was no anxiety in his voice, but a profound weariness which at times seemed to encroach on disappointment.

“These men in the other room,” he said, “are the better politicians that we have, they fight over syntax, trying to gain every inch of land. But the final decision is made by the one who has the dynamite in his pocket. It’s for this they sent me here. I think that you can understand.”

Ned thought that maybe at that moment he was the only person really able to do so and there was no longer a need for that man to introduce himself.

Looking at Michael Collins, Ned felt he shared his torment.

“I can buy time,” continued Collins, “dragging for a while, letting others sift through words, but at the end I’ll have to decide for all. And to write my name near that of my enemy. I’ll have to return home and say that the war is over, that the English will leave, but the new Irish State won’t be totally liberated and won’t ever become a republic, but a *dominion* of the British Crown. I’ll have to say to my comrades that I haven’t obtained that for which they’ve fought and for which many of us died. I’ll have to do this so that the mothers of Ireland won’t have to cry anymore for their sons and because an alternative doesn’t exist. It’ll be my death sentence.”

Ned would not have believed it possible that someone more alone than he could exist. He felt sad for that man.

“Something tells me that you aren’t the type to shy away from this,” he said.

Michael Collins did something surprising: he laughed. A sincere laugh, in the face of destiny.

“I know that your father was Irish. You and I could have ourselves on the same side of the barricade.”

“I’ve never set foot in Ireland.”

“Where I come from one like you could do great things,” he pointed to the surroundings. “When you become disappointed enough with these imperial bureaucrats, give us a little thought.” He stood up. “Now it's better if I go back to my own.”

Ned stretched his hand to him without hesitation. “Good luck,” he said.

“To you too.”

He remained seated immobile for a couple of minutes, unable to focus his thoughts, as if in a dreamy state. The voice of Edward Marsh woke him up. He was at the door, in a dark grey suit of worsted wool, and he was apologizing for making him wait. Churchill had been terribly busy that afternoon, but now finally he would receive him. He escorted him up to a double door, knocked, and when there was an answer from the inside, he made him enter.

40. Welcome

The stupid sentences that he had repeated on the train came to his mind, like: “Welcome, Michael Hilary Reuel,” or “Happy to meet you, I’m your father,” or again a series of invocations and benedictions.

Instead, he remained silent, looking at the young life in Edith’s arms. She was leaning on the bed pillows, her face tired and her eyes feverish with joy. He thought that she had never been so beautiful. He would have wanted to kiss her, but she had Michael on her lap and he was holding John’s hand. Interpreting each other’s thoughts, they burst out laughing without managing to say anything. Ronald sat at the edge of the bed, he clutched John and Edith, who leaned her head on his shoulder. He caressed the face of the newborn with his fingertips.

“Here we are,” he said, embarrassed, his eyes shining, realising that there was nothing to add.

The birth went well, he was already informed about this by a telegram he received in Leeds. Then there was the journey that seemed endless and then the run from the station home.

Finally, Edith's cousin who welcomed him at the door and John, who led him by hand to meet the newborn. New life. An additional one. Once again.

He would soon forget the following hours, due to the excitement and the anxiety for things to be done, but not that first moment, not the first time he had seen the face of his son, trying to guess from inscrutable signs what kind of person he would be. Edith's practical sense did not give him time to lull himself with that fantasy. Soon he would realise that his wife had arranged everything in advance, reorganized the spaces and domestic life expecting the birth, and his absence. Now the domestic ménage revolved just around the latter. Not so much to make him feel out of place, but enough to cause him a certain embarrassment. Even the furniture had been moved, and for him there was a single bed in the smaller room. The new mother needed all the space available. Only the study had not been touched: an unmistakable message. In a couple of days, he ended up exiled in there, given that every step outside the room seemed to be crossing someone's path. The maid kept busy in the kitchen, Edith was preoccupied with the newborn, while her cousin was watching over John, who after the birth of his little brother was showing some disturbance in his sleep.

One single thing really embittered him. Edith communicated it to him after he arrived. She would not go to church anymore. The way she said it suggested that it would make no sense to insist. This too was part of the changes that occurred in his absence. So Ronald resigned himself to go to mass alone.

It was the only sad note, because in spite of the confusion, he felt at home again, among his nearest and dearest, not anymore oppressed by the loneliness in Leeds, even though the days were going fast and soon he would have to return to a compartmentalized life.

He was awakened by a muted noise that broke up his sleep little by little. He opened his eyes in the dark and remained listening, immobile. A little stronger breath was enough to make the bed creak. He thought it could be the rain, but no, the night was calm and the noise did not come from outside. He stood up. The room that he slept in was the only one on the first storey. He looked at the corridor and saw the light coming out of the study. He walked along the corridor slowly, trying to control his anxiety. When he was near the door he heard faint, repeated whispers. Fear dug its teeth in his neck. He swallowed and this seemed to him to make all the noise in the world.

With tight fists he turned past the doorjamb.

The child was turning away, playing with the small paper boat that he had built that afternoon, meanwhile speaking in a low voice.

"John, what are you doing here? It's sleepy time."

The little one turned, serious. He did not seem too surprised to see him.

"Papa."

Ronald looked around, noticing signs of his son's steps. A couple of sheets out of place, pencils scattered on the floor. Fortunately, the paper knife was closed in the drawer.

He took him in his arms and felt his icy skin. He should punish him for walking around at night, but not now. He had to take him to bed quickly before he caught a cold.

"Who were you talking to, John?"

He took the small boat and set it on the desk. The child hid his face against his chest.

Ronald smiled.

"You won't tell me?"

At that moment he was petrified, the same sensation experienced in the small room in Leeds swept over him, after the night of nightmares. Only now it was stronger and his blood ran cold.

John answered with his mouth against his father's pajamas.

"With the elves."

Ronald was unable to move. His heart was pumping fear.

They were here. He could not detect them, but he was clearly feeling their presence at the edge of his field of vision, a few steps from himself and the child. They stood still in the corner in the shadow of the room and his imagination. They had not left him, they were still threatening his life, his loved ones, those he should defend from everything, including his own ghosts. Ronald forced himself not to look at them, but the small one perceived his anxiety and curled his lip. Ronald clasped him and carried him upstairs, where he knocked at Edith's door until she opened in a dressing gown, her eyes sleepy and worried. She gathered the child in her arms, threatening to punish him the following day.

Ronald found himself on the landing, listening to his breathing. After a few minutes of hesitation, he went down the stairs.

The study was lit only by the desk lamp. He remained standing in the middle of the room for a long time, trying to analyze his fear, until he broke the silence with a question.

"What do you want?" he murmured.

"That you return yourself."

He turned around.

Edith was at the door.

"John?"

"He's with Janet, already asleep."

Motherhood had accentuated her facial features, her eyebrows were the blackest possible, nicely shaped, but capable of frowning and giving the impression of surly reproach.

"It wasn't a rhetorical question, right?"

He sat in the armchair and shook his head with a distraught air.

"Whatever it is that's tormenting you, I think that you have to face it." She came near and gathered the pencils that John had spilled on the floor. She placed them in the pencil holder and, to Ronald, they looked like arrows in a quiver.

"It's nothing," he said.

"It's something about you, Ronald," she insisted. "Something that you've lost."

He ran a hand over his eyes.

"Youth, perhaps. Time doesn't make us better."

Edith did not stop staring at him. Ronald knew that determination. It was the same with which a few days ago she had announced that she would never go to church.

"You never wanted to talk to me about it, and I respected your decision. And perhaps now it's too late to help you. But I . . . we want to join you in Leeds and to do it we need you to come back to yourself. . . ." She touched his face with a sad and gentle caress. "Or we won't come."

Ronald saw himself again in the middle of No Man's Land, enveloped by dragons' breath, while he was trying to signal to the others the way to retreat and safety. But the flashing rockets were mixing with the mist and he found himself hobbling along, aware of bodies who were running and falling all around, without being able to see them. Geoffrey and Rob's calls seemed to come from every direction. He should have brought them out of there, pointed out the street to them, if only he had known which one.

It took a few seconds to notice that he was alone. Edith had returned to bed. He looked at the study as if it were the first time. Then he opened the desk drawer and pulled out the pack of yellowed letters. The correspondence that he had with his friends during the war, roughly interrupted by the premature disappearance of two of them.

He opened only one.

About four years had passed since the first and only time that he had read it, immersed in the mud up to his knees, the paper stuck to his nose so that his helmet's visor could protect it from the rain. He put the pipe in his mouth and held it between his teeth, to unwind. He unfolded the paper between his hands once again, hearing it rustle and smelling the humidity that it still preserved.

Dear John Ronald,

My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered tonight—I am off duty in a few minutes—there will still be left a member of the great TCBS to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the TCBS. Death can make us loathsome and helpless as individuals, but it cannot put an end to the immortal four! A discovery I am going to communicate to Rob before I go off to-night. And do you write it also to Christopher. May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot.

Yours forever,

Geoffrey[xxviii]

In the mist, a glimpse of sky opened up, beyond which appeared a glow of sea foam. An opening to get out of the labyrinth, a possible way to escape from the battlefield, before the shadow covered it with innumerable tears. He tore off the gas mask and called his friends. He screamed for them to follow him, towards the calm beach, lapped by the waters of the Western Sea, where the waves were carrying to death the last reflections of the sun and breaking on the sandy keels of a boat.

He looked up at John's small paper boat and in that moment he knew what to do.

41. Manticor in Arabia

Robert re-entered the house and took off his apron. He folded it up with a tired gesture, before putting it away in the wardrobe. Closing shop was a job expected of him, to allow Nancy to return to put the children to bed. The day had been spent after the Christmas orders, the packing and bundling of gifts to sell during the festivities. That afternoon he had sold one of them to the wife of Sir Arthur Evans and another to Professor Murray, with whom he had stayed behind to discuss Euripides. If the fame of his customers were enough to make them rich, they would have already paid their debts. He had never been strong in mathematics, but at closing the accounts of the day, it did not seem that things went according to Nancy's rosy prediction.

He found her at the table with the warmed up dinner served.

Since the establishment of the shop, they had little time to talk about anything else. Nancy was not painting as much, and he, well, for months he did not manage to write one decent line. No new poems, and the graduation thesis was languishing in a drawer. The slavery to a real job fed their frustration every day. Sometimes, when he was behind the counter serving customers, he would find himself thinking what he would write, as if his mind would try to go away somewhere, out of here down the hill, up to Oxford or to the middle of the forest. For the first time he could experience in his being the alienation, the one he had read about in books. The instinct to smile at Mrs. Heaven, to jump over the desk, go outside, was strong. It even happened that he imagined doing so. For a little while he thought that the proximity to home would have allowed him to attend to his children more, but the opposite was true.

As if it was not enough, he missed the conversations with T. E. and their walks on the roofs.

A few weeks before, T. E. had climbed up Parnassus to tell him about his meeting with Winston Churchill. The project had legs. Churchill seemed intent on being serious, he wanted to resolve the situation in the Middle East and to use T. E. to do it. He had been organizing a team of experts, including Hogarth, Lionel Curtis, and Gertrude Bell, in total about forty. "My forty thieves," he called them. T. E. was amused by it and had started to call the Minister of War "Ali Baba." He understood that it was his chance to set things right, clean up loose ends. They would leave for Cairo at the beginning of the year, where the conference on the Middle East would be held. New strategies, new borders, new governments. Everything would be changed. Robert could not but feel envy of that possibility to start a life somewhere exotic in the shadow of the pyramids. How would it have been to give up everything, to go faraway, to follow the trail of the desert?

While he was sitting in front of his steaming soup, he noticed an envelope on the table.

"When did it arrive?"

"This morning."

He read the address of the sender.

"Why were you waiting to give it to me?"

Nancy looked at him askance.

"I'm not your postman."

"I set foot at home just to go to sleep. You could've told me."

"It's from India. You waited for a month, you could wait a day, don't you think?"

Robert felt his exhaustion turning into anger, but he forced himself to control it. He opened the envelope with his knife and disappeared into the parlor, ignoring Nancy's upset expression.

He sat in the armchair

Dear Robert,

You certainly are strange. You pretend to write me to let me know how your family is doing, but in reality you ask me again about Lawrence. I hope that you had also written to the others and not had us all worried as usual.

Let me at least say that I'm very happy that you're well and that I hope to be able to come soon to meet little David, when my work will allow me. I've left the trouble in Ireland only to thread my way into an Indian jungle, no less entangled. To explain to Britlish readers what happens in these parts is a task worthy of Sisyphus, I assure you, that is, of a Graves. At the moment I write you between two articles, with two clocks under my nose, one showing local time, slowly, and the other, Greenwich time, which runs on rotary press rhythm and reminds me of deadlines.

Forgive me, therefore, if I'll be brief, I hope to manage to write you calmly in better times.

As I had foreseen, you haven't followed my advice not to take our Ned Lawrence too close to heart. I know you too well, you continue to hunt for sirens. This time, however, I can't be of much help to you. At the time, in and out of the Arab Bureau, there were circulating rumours about Lawrence's undertakings, some also very bleak. Many were told by us to divert enemy espionage, others were inflated by the troop's words of mouth.

In addition, Lawrence's reports were regularly evasive and filled with gaps; he always let us know what he thought we needed to know. He was very protective of his bonds with the Arabs, and I think that the High State let it slide because of the brilliant results. To follow his movements was nearly impossible, don't believe we didn't try. One time, a little before the conquest of Akaba, he informed us, that he would go north, up to the suburbs of Damascus, to make contact with the Resistance fighters. A journey across the war front, in a region in turmoil. Who knows if he actually went there. Another time he spoke of being captured by Turks and then released without being recognized and suspected of being a British agent.

This man has never told us all the truth. I'll confess to you the hunch that I harboured then—even though I've never made it public—that Lawrence had maintained contact with the network of information we managed together when he was in Cairo. I believe that some of them didn't report to the Bureau or the Information Service, but to him himself, without us knowing anything. I don't know how else to explain the fact that he always had firsthand news, photographs, detailed accounts, before everyone else.

But, unlike you, I've long stopped wondering about the mysteries that that man has woven around himself. Probably because I have other headaches which worry me, seeing that the revolts are now shaking our own, our Empire.

All this to say that in fact I heard about the episode that you referred to, but no one at the Information Service had a way to confirm it. We were at the end of one of the most impressive military campaigns, chaos was ruling supreme, the information was coming in pieces, one after another, not all verifiable, as you can imagine. What we knew was that the Arabs had annihilated the IV Turkish Army Corp and that some prisoners had been shot in Tafas, a small

village near Deraa, on the way to Damascus. But there's no official version of that story. So, my little brother, I really think that you have no other choice but to ask the interested party, even though I doubt that he will respond to you.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, I have to leave you now. Promise me to think of your health, no funny business. Look after Oxford for me, I recommend, and read me in The Times *every now and then.*

A hug for everyone.

Philip

P.S. I received Country Sentiment, *thanks. My favourite? "*Manticor in Arabia," *obviously. It's a kind of an Eastern chimera, right? It seems to me that it has something to do with our common acquaintance. I have learnt that he's preparing something big together with the resurrected Churchill. When* "Shall manticor his sway restore / And rule Arabian plains once more?" ("Manticor in Arabia" lines 27-28).

He stood up, his senses aroused, his fatigue contained by the pressure of his thoughts.

He took his jacket on impulse and noticed Nancy at the kitchen door.

"Are you going to him?"

He did not answer.

"I'm not Penelope. I won't wait for you."

His heart was beating fast, as he went out into the darkness of the night.

The college seemed to be asleep. No one noticed him climbing up the stairs. He knocked at the door of the lodgings without getting any answer. He tried the service room. Silence. Burnes had to be on free leave.

T. E's room was not locked. He entered hesitantly, and suddenly he was assailed by the smell of spices. He turned on the light and the first thing he noticed was the absence of Feisal's stern gaze on the wall. The painting was resting on the floor, in a makeshift package.

Robert took a few steps inside, undecided. The wardrobe was open and empty, no more books, nor ornaments.

A light panic took away his breath, replaced quickly with a deep melancholy.

He was gone.

He saw the package on the table, in the middle of an empty space, which smelled of absence. An envelope was lying on it. He read: "For R. G.," in a handwriting that he knew well.

He pushed aside the letter and took out the package.

The title on the cover was handwritten.

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom.

He took a deep breath, flipped to the first page and found beneath his eyes the dedicatory poem with his overwritten changes.

42. The Little Kingdom

The flat was above a liquor store along Banbury Road.

James Vaughan welcomed him in shirt sleeves and led him inside his private chaos. One of the two small furnished rooms was used as a studio and the walls, crammed with portraits,

made the atmosphere heavy. On a wooden easel the colours reproduced the lines of the buildings at the town centre.

"The view from my window is to the south. Not bad," commented Vaughan as he was offering Jack a chair. "In the morning there's a most beautiful light."

There were books on art and poems thrown in bulk all over the place. A photograph of Lenin cut out of a newspaper served as a model for a portrait in pencil still as a sketch. A mass of withered roses were sticking out from a vase, a faded copy to what they had been. They were giving out a strong, intense perfume.

Vaughan uncorked the wine bottle and filled two glasses.

"There's one thing that I've always wanted to ask you. Why did you take the name of Jack?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's like that since I was a child. Clive Staples is a butler's name."

"Better something more common?"

"I'd say more pleasant."

Vaughan laughed, as he served roast beef and potato on odd dishes.

"Pardon me, but the elegant set. . ." he pretended to look around. "Well, I guess I've never possessed one."

He let himself fall into a worn-out armchair, facing Jack.

They had met each other again the night before after a few months, in Barfield's rooms at Wadham College. Vaughan had invited him for dinner the next day, in his flat, and Jack had accepted willingly, even though when he was about to cross the city by bicycle he had repented. Not so much for the distance, as for the fatigue that was hunting him all day, because of moving and the disturbed sleep of the night before. Moving Mrs. Moore's furniture to the new rented house, decidedly smaller than the one before, was a job of joints and acrobatics. Luckily, they did not have to move far, they had found a flat in Headington.

That afternoon, after having disassembled and reassembled a wardrobe that could not pass through the door, he noticed that by then it was too late to put off Vaughan's invitation, and so he had resolved to ride up to Summertown.

During dinner they drank almost all the wine, and finally Jack felt the heat of satiety pervading over him, especially in his ears. He had to hold back a yawn. Vaughan noticed.

"Either I'm very boring or you're very tired."

"Sorry. I slept little last night."

"Wadham's beer is to blame."

“No, the ugly dreams.”

“Ah.” Vaughan nodded. “The nightmares are always very interesting. Tell me.”

Jack was embarrassed.

“Come on, Jack,” Vaughan hastened to add with a smile and a wink. “I won’t tell Barfield, I promise you.”

He poured more wine for him. There was something annoying and at the same time endearing in the way he smiled and spoke.

“I was flirting with a most beautiful girl,” said Jack. “Then I got up from the bed, went out of the room and found myself in the corridors of a castle. A labyrinth of tunnels which resembled trenches. At that point I realised that I didn’t want to go away from the girl and experienced a very strong desire, uncontrolled, to remain again with her. I turned back, but in front of the closed door a half-naked old woman was squatting. I tried to change directions, I ventured into other arcades, in search of a passage, but every time I ended up at the same door, with the witch who was blocking my entry.”

He stopped. Vaughan was listening attentively.

“Then I woke up,” Jack cut it short.

He omitted saying that that matriarchal horror was grinning with yellowed teeth and was stretching her arms with desire towards him, and that he tried to control his erection without succeeding. He had woken up with a wet stain on his pajama trousers and a feeling of nausea that stayed with him all day.

“What woman is bullying you, Jack?” asked Vaughan.

“There are always more than one interpretation. Freud is of little use.”

Vaughan sipped his wine and appeared to reflect on these words.

“I don’t know. Maybe a dream contains more truth than all the discussions that we have. We’re so accustomed to dissimulating. The truth is not at home in Oxford.” He stood up and reached his painting on the easel. A dotted city, fading in the mists. “Here one comes to hide. There’s he who runs away from a dark past, from a guilt, from a loss. Many have committed crimes in uniform and for this are considered heroes, even though their conscience says something totally different. The cheapest goods in Arcadia is hypocrisy.”

“What did you escape from?” asked Jack.

Again the ambiguous smile.

“From family, obviously. Their disdain was too much to tolerate.”

“This is not a sin,” commented Jack.

“It depends on your point of view.” Vaughan hid a sad expression. “And you? Was it too cold in Belfast?”

“After the death of my mother, my father and I couldn’t talk to each other any longer.”

“How old were you?”

“Nine.”

“And hasn’t there been another woman in your life?”

“No.”

“Who is Mrs. Moore? She’s neither your wife nor your mother.”

“Barfield talks too much.”

“Don’t blame him,” said Vaughan. “I’m very observant. I live on details, light and shadow.”

Jack stared at the withered roses. Some petals had already fallen and lay wilted at the base of the vase. The others were faded and dull. He felt an infinite, overwhelming sadness. He ran his eyes over the paintings and he realised that for the most part they were portraits. He wondered how he had not noticed it before. The subjects were clearly inspired by the Pre-Raphaelites: androgynous boys with bucolic crowns and vermilion lips. Some of them were wearing a uniform. The brush stroke had something original and disturbing. Jack would not know how to explain it, but it was completely evident that those young boys were dead. The artist sweetened their features making them ethereal, those of elven princes which an irresistible call had urged to abandon the earthly world. His sensation of discomfort increased.

“It’s a kept promise.”

The confession seemed to hit Vaughan.

“Who deserves such loyalty?”

Jack looked him in the eye and before he weighed what to say, he noticed that he was already answering.

“His name was Paddy Moore,” he said. “He was eighteen.”

Vaughan nodded very slowly. The level of the wine in the bottle continued to go down.

“I understand. Very noble on your part, worthy of an attendant knight. I told you the first time that we met: you’re one who changes in a hurry. Very difficult to frame and damned intricate.”

“It was easier with Lawrence, I suppose,” said Jack.

Vaughan swallowed the wine in the glass and poured some more.

“Far from it. We shared the same room for a year, and now he’d deny ever having known me.”

“Why?”

“Because I loved him, it’s obvious,” answered Vaughan. “And I made the mistake of telling him this. He grew angry to the point that he fired a shot out of the window.” He hunched his shoulders. “I was young and inexperienced.”

Jack was embarrassed and disgust overwhelmed him, he clawed the armrests of the chair, struggling to remain seated.

“What’s going on, Jack?” smiled Vaughan maliciously. “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

“Is it for this that you hate him? Because he has rejected you?”

An ancient pain came through Vaughan’s face.

“No. Because knowing what I felt for him he was so cruel to ask me to portray the object of his desires. And I wanted to punish myself to the end, accepting to do it. I put my soul in it. I painted him in the clothes of an Arab prince. I would’ve used my own blood.”

Jack looked around, staring at each face, one by one.

Vaughan shook his head.

“It’s in the gallery of the Ashmolean Museum.”

“Who was he?”

“His Hittite prince. His squire. His name was Selim Ahmed. But for him he was Dahoum, the little Moor.”

Jack was feeling dazed, his ears were buzzing, due to the wine and the revelations. Vaughan was looking at him with sympathy, now.

“You didn’t expect it.”

Jack spoke addressing himself, with a mixture of anger and disbelief.

“They have made a national hero of him. That man is false to the marrow. His name, his family, what he has done in Arabia. Even . . . this.”

Vaughan nodded.

“We all are occupied in building images of ourselves. We hide what we don’t like in the casket of secrets. An old trunk, to bury guilt and pain. What’s in yours, Jack?” He stood up and took a small book from the shelf. Jack recognized it, it was his collection of poems, signed with his pseudonym Clive Hamilton. “A false name?” Vaughan sat down again. “A familiar tragedy,” he winked. “A young friend lost . . .”

“You’re wrong. I’m not like you all.”

“You all? It’s just you and me here, Jack.”

“You understood quite well. I promised for life and for death. You did not fight in the war, what do you think you know?”

Vaughan held out the palms of his hands, with a provocative look, an exasperating calm.

"*Touché*, Jack. But I'm not the one having nightmares. Did the promise also mean that you should also be a husband to poor Paddy's mother?"

Jack stood up, a little wobbly in the legs, his mouth furred. He had to make an effort to articulate his words clearly.

"Go to hell, Vaughan."

He staggered up to the door, went down the stairs risking falling, and found himself in the street, Vaughan's voice calling him as if from another planet. He mounted the bicycle and left. It took him several rides to find his balance. Luckily at that hour the street was deserted. The dynamo illuminated a small sliver of asphalt in front of him, while the cold wind cleared his mind and stabilized his thoughts, transforming them into intentions.

Polstead Road was silent. Only a pair of lit windows and a dog barking a few blocks away. He checked Miss Heuwett's windows. They were dark. He saw her again in the kitchen, attempting to pour him tea.

I remember that he forced himself to speak Arabic with his foreign guests.

He left the bicycle, crossed the courtyard, and reached the side door. It was still open. He found himself in the blind spot and remained a few seconds to listen to his own breath.

They slept in the cottage at the end of the garden. You know, the father had it built specially for him, so he could study in peace. It was his little kingdom.

He moved forward along the smooth stone path and arrived in front of the building. He was now far beyond the point he had stopped when he had come here the first time, and he understood that he wouldn't go back.

He tried to look across the dark veranda. There were two doors. He moved quickly, his viscera tightening in a grip of excitement and fear. He chose the one on the left and opened the casket of secrets.

He had to wait for his sight to get used to the darkness inside, before taking one step. When he began to distinguish the shapes, he understood that he was in a sitting room with a fireplace against a partition wall, at the centre of the building. Along the walls, shelves crammed with books. He skimmed the titles. Texts on the Crusades, books on medieval architecture and military science. An assortment of literary works. Poetry. An armchair near the veranda. A gramophone. Beyond the door, the bedroom, a little more than an alcove with a cot and a second entrance. He wondered why a two-room flat would need two doors, and he did not know how to explain that, until a thought insinuated itself, always much sharper. It was as if the architect wanted a secure exit, or an alternative entrance. The building was a kind of a double dealing.

He discovered a candle stub on a shelf. The match sizzled in the darkness and set the wick on fire. Jack shielded the fire with his hand and turned into the sitting room. There was a

long canvas hanging above the fireplace, representing a knight in armour, with his hands in prayer and a lion crouched at his feet. The picture seemed to be of a sepulchral memorial, which as he approached it, Jack noticed it was engraved in lead.

Above the desk hung a portrait in pencil on a sheet of simple paper. By the candlelight Lawrence's eyes were restless, icy, pointing directly at the heart, with a violent demand for attention. Or perhaps help. He remembered the self portrait of Van Gogh. A black line for a mouth, the high forehead, pushing forward like a menacing helmet. Jack shivered.

On the desk, a telephone, a small lamp and the head of an antique statue, a deity probably, which served as a paperweight.

He opened the first drawer. A mass of photographs and a sketchbook. The photographs portrayed castles from specific angles. In the margins, handwritten, French names. In the sketchbook, drawings of other medieval fortresses with exotic names, clinging on dry hills, with a slew of illegible notes at the side.

He opened the second drawer. More photographs.

Jack felt his heart beat faster as he observed a dark boy, in Arab clothes, smiling with white, perfect teeth.

On the back, a poem written by hand.

I gaze at you now, my darling, my brother

the pistol asleep in your young groin,

your lips pulled back in a mighty grin.

My little Hittite, after you there can be no other.

In your dark eyes, my darling, my brother,

The world was created from the waters of Chaos;

now black waves of tears

crash upon the beaches of my sleep

and drown my dreams forever.[xxix]

Dahoum. The little Moor.

In the photograph he was holding a pistol in his hand. The same that lay at the bottom of the drawer. Cold as death.

43. Dahoum

His brother Bob had gone to bed soon. After dinner he had kissed his mother and said goodbye to him, wishing him a good trip.

Ned helped Sarah clear the table and tidy up the kitchen. He observed her while she was drying the dishes and putting them up carefully in the cupboard. Her hair had become grey quickly, under the weight of mourning, but her face kept the old strength. While they were eating, he explained what he would be doing in Egypt, without waiting for their approval. He knew that they were aware of the crucial role that he was destined to do, but they were not accustomed to take pride in it. After all, Ned was not expecting it, his father had been the only one to hold him in great esteem and consider him worthy of great deeds. But his father was an old-fashioned gentleman, who had broken the conventions for love. Sir Thomas Robert Tighe Chapman could have led his life in South Hill, in the heart of Ireland, together with his wife and daughters. To get old in the grand country mansion that Ned had seen only in photographs and to die at peace with God and people. It would have been an unhappy existence, because of frustration and yet in line with the social expectation of the world. But his daughters' small nanny, much younger than he, had enchanted him with her eyes the color of the sea and the energy of a life tempered with difficulties, those that he had never known. He had taken her to Dublin, already pregnant, then to Tremadoc. And also to Scotland and the Isle of Jersey. Finally to Oxford. Wandering around for as long as their love, chased by pregnancies and by the truth that at every corner would catch up with them, forcing them to forge ahead toward normal life. They had to feign a wedding, to bypass a never granted divorce and save appearances. A new name, Lawrence. A sham. Five sons to raise.

He looked at his mother again and he realised that he would appreciate a little tenderness from that woman, that tenderness that he did not receive as a child. Perhaps it was this that he could not forgive her for. Much more than the hypocrisy and the secret which she forced upon them. By now it was too late to make it up. The rigid upbringing, made of inculcated penitence, prayers and beatings on the back, was an impassable wall between them. He knew that she feared for her son's soul. But not because of earthly glory of a passing stage, as much as for what she had intuited one summer day, years ago, watching him and Dahoum, frolicking in the garden or bathing in the river. Her puritan conscience blocked her from admitting it in clear letters, but the instinct of motherhood had put her on guard then. He could not accept such disapproval, not from one who had founded her family on what her own religion labeled as a mortal sin. And so it had been a challenge between two counterpoised forces, one perched inside the domestic walls, the other in the conquest of the world and his own destiny.

Yet, in spite of everything, he realised that in that strange conflict from afar they had cared for each other.

"Good night, Ned."

"Good night, Mama."

He listened to her steps up the stairs, the door of the bedroom that opened, again her steps in the room, finally silence. He imagined the prayers for her "misguided" son whom God had not graced with true faith.

He went back to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. Beyond the window, the night blanketed the garden and the small shape of the cottage. His father had understood the disruptive capacity of two magnetic personalities in the family and had offered him that possibility: a *dépendance*, a shelter from Sarah's undisputed authority. He was a peaceful man, who evaded conflicts. He had lived half his life fleeing and at the end the Spanish Fever caught up with him. The destiny that Ned had chosen prevented him from being at his deathbed, as the war had prevented him from the deathbed of Frank and Will. And of Dahoum.

The memories of the last happy summer engulfed him, and he could not help it. The laughter of Hamoudi, the head of the excavation in Carchemish, watching him attempt to teach the boy to ride a bike, in that very garden. The boy on account of whom he had challenged the German ogre who had belted and humiliated him in front of everybody. From that moment the black eyes of Dahoum had shone with devotion, they would accompany him into Sinai, together with Woolley, and at the end they would hold the promise of return under the unfurled flag of a new nation. His gift, the house of seven pillars that Ned would have wanted to build only for him. He who had waited beyond the lines, taking pictures of wagons and airplanes, passing important information, and could not know that he would be dead at the hands of a sly and invisible enemy.

Every time he went to visit Hogarth at the Museum he would go look at the image of Dahoum in the hall of portraits. It was an homage, or rather a destructive dose of self-pity for having sacrificed to his mission the only person he had ever loved.

It is curious that during those visits he had met Tolkien. A modest man, but sharp, with whom he could become a friend. Perhaps in a parallel world where Lawrence of Arabia never existed and had not cluttered the horizon, they could have spent many hours at the Museum, under the aegis of Merlin, speaking about antiquity and writing, like two among the many sons of Oxford.

He thought it was better to go and pack the last things for leaving. He wanted to take the first morning train. He went out in shirt sleeves and felt the cold piercing his skin. Nothing compared to that suffered in Syrian nights.

He crossed the lawn, and only when he was near the entrance did he notice the gleam of a flame inside.

He stopped and slipped to the side of the veranda. He took off his shoes and reached the door at right. He opened it slowly, avoiding the slightest creak, and squeezed in.

The rustle of papers in the other room took away any doubt. He peered beyond the door jamb and saw the dark shape of a man sitting at the desk, the photographs spread in front of him, his face barely illuminated by the candlelight. The stranger felt his presence, lifted the pistol and pointed it at him.

"Who are you?" asked Ned.

"No one." The man stood up, his arm stretched forward. "Sit down."

The words sounded nervous. Ned obliged. He reached the armchair and sat down. The stranger turned on the desk lamp and Ned tried in vain to identify that oval face, black, short hair. He seemed to be a little more than twenty.

"Who are you?" he repeated.

The other turned around the table and leaned on the edge, continuing to keep him under fire.

"The question is rather who are you, Colonel. If people knew it, it wouldn't be so easy for you to play the part of the betrayed hero."

Ned remained quiet. The stranger twisted his mouth.

"I doubt that illegitimate sons who carry a false name and have an unnatural habit are well-liked in the opinion of the public."

Ned sensed his blood turn to ice, his heart beat faster. He had to take a deep breath to control his fear.

"What do you want?"

He saw him take one of the photographs on the table.

"You told him what you were doing there?"

He threw it in his lap. Ned glanced at it, then turned to stare at that pale and washed-out face.

“Tell me who you are.”

“It’s not important. One of many who have spat blood in the trenches. Those who have kept true to their word and who wake up every morning knowing that they have to face the consequences. Those who are not praised by anyone. Those to whom you should account for your lies.”

Suddenly, his fear vanished leaving in its place a wave of sadness, so pressing that he thought it would not ever leave him.

“He wouldn’t have cared,” he said. “Only a few of us knew it.”

“The Round Table.”

Ned looked at his hands, as if he could read in them all the answers. For the first time in years he did not feel obliged to lie. It was a relief, almost a liberation, but without joy.

He lifted his eyes and stared at that spectre who popped out of nowhere, renouncing to identify himself. He spoke slowly.

“I have never been affiliated at all with the society. I only knew that they would support the most audacious choices. Whoever you are, if you came to try me I don’t think I’ll give you much satisfaction. I have nothing to defend, and this is my only luck. People want a hero to carry in triumph and someone to hate. For this I am being praised and Michael Collins will be crucified. It’s an enormous injustice.”

The other one lowered the weapon, but he held it in his hand, resting on his knees.

“Is this the way you hope to get away?”

There was anxiety in his voice, exasperation to the point of exploding.

“I don’t hope for anything,” he answered in a tired tone. “I have the opportunity to return there to try to tidy things up. It’s all that I can do.”

“Rubbish. You want to clean your conscience, to come out of there as a hero again. But you are a bluff, Colonel, don’t forget it. Nothing but a lie carried around in theatres, good for magazines.”

Ned became despondent.

“You’ve decided to be my jury,” he looked at the weapon. “My executioner. But you’re only a fool with a pistol in his hand. You think that you discovered the truth and you know nothing.”

The other spat out his anger.

“I know that you’re a pederast, a traitor, and a liar. If there’s justice, you should pay for all this.”

I know who you are.

The words emerged like a body on the surface of a pond and hit him in the stomach, taking away his breath.

I know who you are.

The guttural language of the ogres frightened him again.

He made an effort not to vomit.

You are a traitor and a liar.

The Turkish non-commissioned officer was flexing a camel's whip.

Do you know what we do to those who escape the draft? There’s a special treatment for those like you. Take off your clothes.

Ned stood up from the armchair. The other seemed to wake up and raised the pistol again.

“Stop.”

“The path to punishment is paved with humiliation, suffering, acute pain. But we must know how to inflict them. Do you think you can?”

Take off your clothes, I said.

He took a step forward and unbuttoned his shirt.

The exasperation of the other exploded into a snarl.

“Stop!”

Hold him still.

“Is this what you want, no?” said Ned. “Make things right. Punish me.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Do it.”

He stood naked from the waist up. He pulled his trousers down and turned around. He let him see his swollen back, the scars that ran down from the shoulders to the buttocks, dense like a spider’s web. In the flickering candlelight they looked like living creatures, long, purple leeches, stuck to the flesh. He felt again the breath of the ogre on his neck, the hands that pinned him down to the wooden table in the police station in Deraa. He let the memory of those sensations choke him, until he was out of breath, and the sound of a cry brought him back to the present.

He turned around. The man was on his knees, the hand that clutched the pistol hanging on his side, murmuring words garbled by tears.

“Damn bastard . . . bastard . . .”

Ned picked up the photograph. He looked at it, listening to the faint sound of the laughter in the garden.

“Typhus killed him, but it was I who condemned him,” he said. “He would have done anything for me. Instead of bringing him to safety, I turned him into a spy. If I had kept him with me, I could have protected him. I only managed to arrive late at his deathbed.”

With a great effort, the other lifted the weapon again and lay it on his stomach. He mumbled a name between his teeth, his face distorted.

“Paddy . . .”

Ned took the pistol without force. He kneeled beside him and touched his face with his hand.

He kissed him on the lips as one kisses a dying person. The kiss that he could not give to Dahoum the night he got to him only to hug a corpse.

The other seemed to regain the force of will and pulled himself up, one hand on his mouth. Ned saw him running out and disappearing into the darkness. The sound of his footsteps became distant until it ceased.

He stared at the wall in front of him and lifted the pistol with a sinister grin. He placed it at his forehead, while tears were streaming down his face, the muscles of his body contracted in an attempt to overcome the will to die. He looked at himself on the wall, the eyes of a psycho, the same as Cardigan’s in the painting at the Ministry of War. A hero’s face. He again felt the hatred he experienced in Tafas, but without being able to pour it against an enemy who was not himself.

He fired.

The split face became monstrous. That of a Minotaur, of an infernal beast.

He tore it from the wall, uncovering the bullet hole, and rolled it up in his hand.

The telephone rang.

“Yes.”

“Ned! Ned, what happened?”

“Nothing. A shot was fired accidentally.”

“You'll cause our mother a heart attack.”

“Tell her to go back to sleep, Bob. Everything is fine.”

He hung up. Then, feeling tired, he put on the shirt and sat down at the desk, where he started to tidy up the photographs.

Lord Dynamite

Tafas, South of Syria, Setptember, 1918

The light of the bonfire emphasizes the contrast of the shadows on the faces, making them sinister. If it were not for the clothes, in the tired silence of the night, it would be hard to distinguish the few Englishmen from the Arabs. After months of close contact, the bodies have become the same, in the informality of the nomadic life and the roughness of the journey. For a few it is about an eternal destiny; for others it is only a temporary means towards the end. It is a cold night, the first of real rest, after days spent destroying the entire railway lines in Deraa and watching the air duel between the RAF and the Turkish aircraft. A grand show for the men of the desert, who cannot stop talking about it in the camp bivouacs. Fires that reflect the stars, only smaller and more fragile, but less cold, sparkles of struggle for a goal as noble as liberty and as base as gold.

The midnight news arrives with a liaison officer. He travelled by air from the general quarter of Allenby and later by car.

“The IV Army Corp of Jemal Pasha withdraws in disarray to Deraa. Thanks to your work they won’t be able to receive reinforcement. I bring you compliments from General Allenby. His orders are to retreat and wait for the British troops to storm the city and continue to advance to Damascus.”

The leaders do not need to share their own thoughts. Auda, Nuri Shaalan, Tallal, Nasir. Their silence asks him to explain the decision that will be taken.

The Englishman, wrapped up in the worn-out mantle, is lying on the mat, stargazing.

Auda joins him and sits by his side.

“You can’t stop now.”

“I should. I have received orders.”

“But you aren’t like them,” the knobby finger of Auda points to the other Englishmen. “You never stop thinking. Not even when you sleep.”

“You don’t know what I would give not to do it, Auda. I’m so tired.”

“You can’t be who you’re not, Urens. You don’t want things to end this way, a step away from the goal. Now that Feisal has sent us reinforcements and all of Syria is ready to rise up as we pass through. It was you who wanted it, don’t forget it.”

Auda stands up and for a moment he looms over him with all his dark bulk. Then he returns to the leaders’ bonfire.

“What will he do?” asks Nasir.

“He’ll come with us, he can’t stop. But he’s changed. It’s like death has touched his heart, as if living is less important for him.”

“When he went scouting in Deraa the Turks captured him. You know what they do to prisoners.”

Auda shakes his head.

“His wound is not in the flesh.”

The two men stretch on the mat, wrapped up in their heavy mantles, trying to get some sleep. It is only shortly before dawn that a creaking of steps urges them to spring up. The group of camel drivers leads the beasts across the encampment that is waking up. It is the personal escort of Lawrence. He rides ahead.

Auda plants himself in front of a camel, forcing the Englishman to pull up the reins.

“Where are you going?”

The light-coloured eyes of the Englishman stare at the black eyes of the Arab.

“To tell everyone that the army of Feisal is on its way. And he is come to redeem four-hundred years of slavery.”

The white of artificial teeth stands out on the grim face of Auda, who responds with a cry, echoed by hundreds of voices, then thousands, from one end of the camp to the other.

The march stops in the midday heat, in a sheltered dip which cannot contain the always increasing ranks of camel drivers. The village men nearby keep joining in under the banner of the Prince.

A column of smoke climbs from behind the hill that hides Deraa. The news reaches them with the galloping of messengers. They have seen the burning of stores and German airplanes. The Turks are evacuating the city.

Winterton spurs his mount up to Lawrence's side, straight in the saddle.

"It is the rearguard of Jemal that retreats towards Damascus. Chauvel's cavalry will take care of it."

A sudden excitement among the ranks forces him to turn. Tallal is speaking fast and shakes his whip towards the north.

It is Auda who explains in the local dialect.

"The first village on their path is that of Tallal. All his family is there."

Winterton talks to Lawrence.

"The orders are to let them go."

Tallal is already gathering his men.

The voice of Auda betrays the concern.

"We must act fast, Urens."

Lawrence does not stop staring at the smoke on the horizon. He thinks of the exhausting march of the last days and of the men's fatigue. He thinks of Damascus, so near, beyond the palms ahead. If Damascus falls, the Ottoman Empire will completely break up. With the surrender of Turkey its allies in Europe will be at a disadvantage, in a short time they will have to give up. The war will end.

Then he thinks of the women and the children on the path of a broken army, desperate with nothing more to lose. He hears a voice, his own, ordering them to move forward. Faster than the wind from the South.

From the hill the village is a smoky desolation. The regiment of Jemal Pasha's lancers moves away into the plain and goes to close the already marching column. They leave behind the fires set among the houses. And the silence. Thick. Heavy. The desire to say anything dies in the mouth. They withdraw in an orderly manner, the infantry in the middle, the artillery covering the sides. Seen from up high they are still an army.

The dromedaries are nervous, the men in the saddle worried, tired, preoccupied with the thought of what they will find. An exchange of nods with the French gunner is enough to have

him place their cannons and take aim at the Turks from the top, to cover the descent of the camel drivers down the slope.

They continue wary and quiet, in the midst of the smoke that rises from piles of blackened corpses, now unrecognizable. A sudden movement pushes them to aim the weapons, but it is only a child fleeing, thinking the Turks are back. Aziz follows her and kneels beside her to calm her down. The little one has a wound from a lance on her neck and her clothes are soaked with blood. She cannot be more than four. She screams against them, white arms stretched to the sky, before falling dead on the ground.

They proceed into the village. The inhabitants are killed on the spot, mutilated by knives. On a wall, the naked body of a pregnant woman, nailed down by a bayonet which sticks out between her legs. Around, her sons. Broken into pieces.

Someone vomits.

Only one Turk did not manage to leave. He is wounded, naked from the waist up, and begs for mercy in the dust. He is taken to be whipped, screams, his blood spurts out. The man rolls and begs, until a fast black figure moves the others away and shoots him three times in the middle of his chest.

Auda Abu Tayi sheathes the pistol and points to the trail of dust on the horizon.

“There are two thousand, over there.”

The men climb up again into the saddle and reach the edge of the village. An animal cry resounds from a nearby hill. On the top, Tallal rigidly watches the Turks who are retreating, in the warm evening air. Horse and rider, trembling, stand out against the red of the sunset.

Lawrence spurs his camel to join him, but one strong hand grabs the reins. Auda shakes his head, not saying a word.

Tallal wraps his headdress in front his mouth and launches into a gallop.

Perhaps the gunners on the hill have also seen him, because the cannon shots cease, and the two armies remain astonished spectators of that solitary ride, which becomes an unnatural and unreal act because of its perfect coordination, the linearity of the trajectory, while Tallal is upright in the saddle and unsheathes the blade.

His war cry resounds strongly, terrible like a curse.

Only at that point do the Turks open fire, riddling animal and rider, whose momentum plunges them on the point of their spears.

The silence returns to dominate the evening.

“May God have mercy on him. They will pay also for this, too.” Auda’s verdict gives one the shivers.

He moves ahead of the ranks of warriors, restraining his horse, he looks at them in the eye, one by one, without saying anything, as if he is recruiting them for the Day of Judgment.

Winterton grabs the other British officer by the sleeve.

“They are regular soldiers who are retreating. I beg you, Lawrence.”

The Englishman’s eyes are wide with the horror that he would not have wanted to see, his throat choked with hate. What is corroding his soul since the day they tortured and tormented him. Since the night when he cursed himself, the war and the Ottoman Empire, in front of Dahoum’s corpse.

“You’re an officer of His Majesty,” begs Winterton angrily. “You have to allow them to surrender.”

Lawrence does not hear him. He looks at the faces of his sixty assassins, the escort who would follow him to hell for an ounce more of gold, dull looks of cutthroats and marauders, now lit by a dark light.

He listens to his own voice, the hissing of a serpent.

“The best of you will be the one who will bring me more dead Turks.”

Winterton steps back, frightened, as if his touch were poisonous.

Lawrence lines up his men together with the others. He reads the last order in their dark hearts, before the magnetic force of Auda drags everyone towards revenge.

“No prisoners.”

It is a feverish gallop, deafening, a moving mountain. The Turks prepare for defense, but the awareness of that which they have done numbs their hands and transforms into terror.

No prisoners.

The splendid lancers of Jemal the Bloodthirsty point the spears. The machine guns crackle. But the bullets cannot stop the hate. What comes down on them is a tangle of beasts and men, muscles and blades, teeth and claws. Auda cracks the ranks, breaks it. His sword falls on heads, shoulders, arms and every time it is raised it is redder. Because Auda is now the Apocalypse and his is the destiny of all until the end of time. He chases the Turks to an unfavourable terrain, their order for battle crumbles. They flee, but they do not know that there is no escape. The verdict has been pronounced millennia ago, the same fate for all. The light fades rapidly, but those men do not need to see, they sniff, track, bite. The plain is a chaotic stretch of clashes, in a little time the radius of the battle extends for kilometres. From nearby villages peasants descend with makeshift weapons and they finish off the wounded or dismounted Turks. One of them will tell about having seen a white figure galloping with a spear in place, piercing his enemies one by one. Because at dusk the Archangel Michael was riding by the side of great Auda Abu Tayi and was repeating in his ear the same words.

No prisoners.

Even those who surrender, the water carriers, the muleteers. Anyone who stops and begs for mercy, with raised hands, stumbles and does not have the force any longer to grovel. There is

a blow for everyone. In the face for the lucky ones, in the abdomen for the miserable, whom at dawn the jackals find still alive. A band of followers run in every direction, led away by the same fury, they push forward, again and again, they will not stop until they find Turks in their path. Auda will arrive in Damascus, even in Constantinople, to pluck out the heart of Anver Pasha and the Sultan.

In the last light of the evening the plain is a stretch of corpses. An ancient battlefield. It could be Kadesh, or Armageddon. The Englishman stands on the footboard of a convertible automobile. His face is darkened by dust, he looks at the human corpses inside. Nasir approaches cautiously, enough to see the German uniforms stained with blood. Lawrence stares at the lifeless body on the back seat: the face of a German is covered with blood, his moustaches matted. A hole stands out on the temple. Lawrence senses Nasir's presence without needing to turn around.

“He shot himself,” he murmurs. “He was a railroad engineer, before the war.”

He seems heartbroken. Nasir has to call him twice to wake him up from a nightmare with open eyes. He tells him that a local tribe joined the battle and has taken prisoners.

The Englishman hunches his shoulders and gestures in a tired manner.

“Let them go. They will be witnesses to our anger.”

“It’s better if you come, Urens.”

The Englishman resigned himself to follow him, while now the night gobbles up a piece of the plain from the east and has already taken half of the sky.

A little far away, what remains from one of the Turkish platoons has regrouped in a dip, under the gunpoint of two Hotchkiss machine guns. Covered with grunge, torn uniforms, lips cracked by thirst and obtuse looks. They are pitiful and disgusting.

There is an Arab on the ground, stretched on a dark spot of his own blood. He is nailed to the ground by two bayonets, one pierces his shoulder, the other his leg. He has a cut in his thigh, deep into the bone. The artery was cut off and the man is done for. He cries the name of Urens, he calls him desperately. He clutches the filthy clothes of the Englishman who kneels at his side.

“Tell me who did it, Hassan.”

The eyes of the Arab rotate until they fix on the prisoners, but he has no breath left to curse them.

Lawrence stands up and looks at those men for a long time, so that they understand without words, so they can realise what awaits them. The clothes and the face covered by gun powder, the feverish azure eyes, he must seem to them a demon who jumped out of the deeper abyss to drag them down with him. They clutch each other in a big embrace, the younger ones cry on the shoulders of their comrades, receiving tender caresses. They are eighteen-year-old boys, called up from every corner of the Empire. For a moment a spark of humanity revives in that Godforsaken plain. Just before the Englishman gives the order to the gunners.

Only when the heap of corpses stops quivering, he unsheathes the pistol and goes down. He turns them over with his feet and finishes off those who are still in pain. He shoots them in the face or the neck, until the drum is empty. Then he draws the long dagger.

When he goes back, the darkness has now erased them from view.

Nasir stares with fear at the reddish mask of blood and sweat. What he sees is the face of a prophet, the one who sees, on which madness and determination have made their mark.

“What do we do now, Urens?”

He looks north, where the battle gunshots are still ringing. He asks for a mount.

“We’ve bitten the dragon’s tail. We have to strike him at the heart. For Tallal, Hassan and all the others.”

“This night we’ll damn our soul.”

The Englishman nodded.

“And we’ll conquer an empire.”

He raises up his dromedary and spurs him towards Damascus.

44. The Way Home

Robert turned the last page and remained seated staring at the piece of sky tinged with pink beyond the window. The sparrows have started to chirp.

He massaged his tired eyes and looked again at the room that was becoming indeterminate each minute. Soon even the smell of spices would evaporate. He took a deep breath as if he wanted to imprint it deep in his memory. That night's reading had chased away sadness, as slowly as the story of the great adventure was leading him from the desert to the minarets of Damascus. Yet, the anxiety of a lost opportunity remained. Now he would want to speak with him about the book, there were a thousand of things to say.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps he would want only to ask him to take him along, to redeem a failed revolution, to grant him the enchantment of a journey where legends still had a name and things were simple and direct like life or death.

He put down the manuscript and opened the letter with shaky fingers.

He decided not use the lamp, he went near the window to capture the first light of the day.

Dear Robert,

As you know saying goodbye is not my strong point. Therefore, don't get angry, I beg you, at this secret flight. I leave you these few lines and my book. Keep it until my return. And maybe in the meantime, choose a couple of chapters to send to that American publisher I talked to you about. He offers a nice figure for an advance copy, which can help you in the shop business. Don't be offended, I wouldn't accept that money, in any case, and it is better that this river of ink is useful to someone. It has helped me understand a couple of things. At the start I hoped that by putting doubt and uncertainty on paper, I would succeed in understanding my path, in convincing myself of how right or wrong it was.

So the book is the self-argument of a man who couldn't then see straight: and who now thinks that perhaps it did not matter: that seeing straight is only an illusion. We do these things in sheer vapidity of mind, not deliberately, not consciously even. To make out that we were reasoned cool minds, ruling our courses and contemporaries, is a vanity. Things happen, and we do our best to keep in the saddle.[xxx]

Yours,

T. E. L.

He folded up the paper and looked for the last stars in the patch of sky between the buildings. Without thinking he found himself on the window sill, then on the roof, wrapped by the chilling night, resolute to indulge in nostalgia of past moments, to keep the memory better, even at a cost of getting hurt. Because he was sure that however things had gone, they would not return. He started walking slowly, his hands in his pockets for the cold. The last *promenade* in homage to the friendship and the magnificent book that helped him get through the night.

In minutes Oxford would be awake to begin a new day, the same as every other, until the end of time. But at that moment before the dawn it was a ghostly city, white and immobile, empty of life. As if the inhabitants had gone elsewhere, following an irresistible call. He felt such that he could have screamed to receive in response only the echo from the deserted streets, from the facades of buildings, from college cloisters.

Instead, he heard a distant rumble that was approaching, slowly growing stronger, as if a magma was boiling under the pavement. He stretched to see the herd invade the street below and the gate of the Quadrangle widen, leaving the deer to enter in a thunderous and spectacular gallop of horns and spotted coats. Neville and Archer greeted him from below, while the windows of the college were opening one after another, revealing the students' sleepy faces. The applause and shouts erupted, scarves waved, whistles unleashed. A contagion that spread to Lincoln, where the young men responded with more rowdiness, and from here Exeter, Hertford, the windows of Queen's and New College teemed with faces, courtyards filled with voices and laughter. And still, beyond High Street, University and Oriel answered the calls with the same breath and applause. Big Tom started to toll out of time, someone in Christchurch had to climb up the tower to jolt it. All pointed upwards, where the glances searched to catch a glimpse of the shape that was running fast, a white spectre jumping from one cornice to another, accompanied by the shouts of everyone.

Urens! Urens! Urens!

It seemed that he was about to take flight, he was so agile and light among spires and chimneys, as if he could cross the whole city from that height. Every building he touched was a chorus of incitement. All stretched their necks to see him, but he was nothing more than a fleeing shadow, a white shape waving in the weak light of dawn. Robert lost him in the forest of pinnacles, when the low and vibrating sound of a battle horn urged him to look beyond the roofs of Oxford.

Then he saw them: A long, thin line in the mirage of the day that was born. Hundreds, thousands, on the edge of the hills. Warriors of the Orient ready to come down on the city and open that golden gate with the impact of a flooding river. To liberate their Prince and carry him back to the desert.

The emotion made his nerves throb, delicate and labile like rose petals, until it turned into a solitary laugh, almost a cry that broke the absolute silence.

He stopped at the end of the path that went up the hill, the mud frozen underfoot, his heart shrunk into a fist. He glanced a little over the horizon and he saw her. She was there, to send the last gleams, to announce the death of the night and the arrival of the sun. He welcomed the farewell song of the birds, which, unlike the still sleeping men, kept the memory of dawns as ancient as the world. Lucifer. Venus. They have given her many names, without succeeding to reduce her either to the power of darkness or of daylight. Solitary, genderless, the only spark of a hesitant god. Her power was that which she possessed: a soft light, a persisting courage. That

which one would need to cross No Man's Land, as vast as the century looming ahead. And to find the way home.

45. The Tea Club and Barrovian Society

"And you, John Ronald, what have you brought?"

The question is a little more than a whisper, in the depressing dim light of the academic library. The books rise up to the ceiling, where the light of the small lamps cannot reach them, protecting them from prying eyes, from the arrows of the world that waits outside, to test their fragile existence.

Ronald opens the notebook and starts to read the story about the ones who escaped the fall of Gondolin and the collapse of the last free kingdoms. He leads them to the mouths of the river Sirion, on the western edge of Middle Earth, where the veterans still survive from the advance of the Shadow.

Among them a young half-breed grows proud, who carries in himself the blood of the ancient stock of men and elves. His eyes are the color of the sea, for having spent years contemplating the immensity of the ocean, until feeling it enter into him and wanting to cross it. Reaching the other shore, the land of the blessed, of the ancestors, of the gods, which never again will be lapped by the darkness. Finding a walkable path across the desert of water. This is his destiny.

"So Eārendel built a boat and sailed to where the sun dies. His journey became a legendary feat, an emblem of the return to origin, of lasting glory. Admiring him, the gods transformed him into a star, so that his gleam could guide the sailors at night. The first star shining on the sea, the last one disappearing in the daylight. Those men lost in the vastness of the ocean would have looked up and felt less alone, recognizing a brother sailing across the sky and pointing the path through the stars."

He closes the notebook and found himself in front of enraptured faces, who do not show the signs of time. It is how he wants to always remember them, while they hold the cups, appropriated from an old cellar, as if they are sacred and bring them close to each other over the round table. Geoffrey Bache Smith. Robert Quilter Gilson. Christopher Luke Wiseman. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. The knights of the TCBS.

"To the immortal four."

Ronald lifted the pen from the paper and dried the ink with a blotter. He had been writing all night without showing signs of exhaustion.

May you tell the things I have tried to say even after I will no longer be here to do it.

Only now did he manage to give those words the appropriate meaning. Now that the whole world was no longer the same. The dominion of the machines had begun, the only undisputed winners in the great conflict, and those that would follow. His life was much different from that which he had imagined, nothing more than the attempt to preserve a glimmer of serenity and hope in a century of steel and poisonous gases. But earlier, earlier they had been there, with the greatest ambitions, high expectations, and a challenge thrown against life, against all the literature, against the culture of an unbefitting time, which is always the time when you live as a child. Those were his heroes. Common men who had been thrown by the millions into No Man's Land and did not back out.

He recalled in his mind the nightmare that he had in Leeds. The hero who wrestled with him. The hero who could not be helped. He again heard the words of Professor Hogarth, a long time ago, at the Museum. Merlin was convinced that the mythical past inspires men's actions, to the point that he compared Lawrence of Arabia to the hero of an ancient poem. Ronald recalled being left perplexed, then, but only now did he understand why. That horrible dream had helped him figure out his doubts.

Hogarth had been silent about the retaliation of the hero, of his dark side. The first time that they had met, Lawrence had given him an impression of weakness and fragility. He had resembled an alien creature, small, vaguely deformed. And the second time, when he had found him stuck to the rings' glass case, longing to return to the limelight, to be again demi-god, and at the same time crushed by a sense of guilt for not having been up to the challenge and failing to write a plausible account about it. As if the world were only a stage on which to perform a role.

He could not but experience a profound sympathy for that lonely and pitiful man, Lawrence *Turambar*, master of fate and destroyer of himself.

Yet he had been able to tell him the right thing, to seize the destiny they both shared. He had to go on with the story, or the ghosts would never have had peace in his mind. That was the heroic feat for which to dedicate the time that remained. To resume the work where it had been interrupted. Start from the original intuition, born in the darkness of a library, many years ago. He had to make the stories more organic, make of them a saga about a world. Not another world, but his, the glory and the misery of men. Love, war, betrayal and redemption.

For over a year he had let those stories languish in his notebooks, like boring hobbies. He had even thought of letting them settle in a dusty attic, fables to read to children and nephews.

Now he could see things from a different perspective, as if he were hovering over and could contemplate at a glance the entire plan. The necessary architecture was complex. There were still blank spaces to fill, scaffoldings to build or solidify, so that everything would hold together with a necessary coherence. But at the end he would complete the work, those lost tales

would compose a mythology, from the creation of the world to the advent of the age of men, populated by creatures thrown down on Earth to shape the creation and in the end give way to the present. Paper and ink like rock and scalpel, flesh and blood. The secret of words.

After all, he had been working for years on the language of fairies, rather, of elves, until he was convinced more and more of being engaged in a meticulous decoding. Like Evans before a Minoan tablet. He only had to listen to them, rearrange their songs, follow the thin thread of syllables that would lead him to the light.

Beren, Lúthien; the founders of the city of Gondolin and its destroyers; Túrin and Tuor; Eārendel, the hero who would give back hope to the survivors and undertake a journey worthy of Odysseus, until he was transformed into the brightest star. And many others. All his characters would have entered the grand plan, every fragment would reverberate on the set. The very coherence of that world would have made it true to the eyes of the ones who would choose to explore it. Like a traveler who travels to unknown lands, discovering something that had preceded the history of ordinary mortals and left a trace of himself in the sagas that escaped the oblivion of time.

It was like pretending to compete with the millenary stories, left as sediments for generations until they have become pillars of manifold civilizations. An endeavour that could require a lifetime.

It did not matter how much time it would have taken, there was nothing else he could do. He had to cross the desert, to find a way to follow. To put Rob and Geoffrey on that boat.

At the edge of the lamp's circle of light, he saw the shadows dissolve, and he knew they would not come back, ready to undertake the journey beyond the great sea, where one day he would reach them.

Edith opened her eyes suddenly. It was early morning. She sat up and her glance fell quickly on the cradle.

Empty.

Concern rose up from her stomach, a vague sense of panic left her speechless. She stood up, went into the kitchen, the cook was bent over the oven and did not even notice her. The bathroom. John and Janet’s room, where both were still asleep.

She got to the front of the study door and opened it without knocking.

Little Michael was sleeping with his head on the shoulder of his father, who was walking back and forth in the room, rocking him with the sweetest words. Edith remembered the sound, even though it was several months since she had heard it. Warmth spread through her whole body, the tension melted in a smile. Ronald saw her, and smiled back at her, without stopping to sing.

She came near, embracing both, to the sound of that elfish lullaby.

46. *Morte D'Arthur*

The voices from the lower storey wake him up. That of his father full and jovial, the tone of his mother's calm and rational. Jack gets down from the bed, impatient. It takes a couple of jolts to get Warnie down too. The two boys move together, on tiptoe, without any need to say anything. They only carry a blanket. They climb the ladder that leads to the attic, trying not to make the wooden steps creak. Beyond the tiny door they run into the smell of humidity and old stuff. Jack likes it, it smells of timeless secrets and antiquities. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of books, on makeshift shelves or piled up in precarious and dusty columns. Warnie stifles a sneeze which could betray them. Mamy and Papy do not want them to climb up here, it is very cold, they say. Excited, they find themselves in front of a big trunk with rusty knobs, the blanket drawn about their shoulders, like a mantle too big for one. They slowly lift the lid, not to make it squeak, and gaze, anxious, at the contents of the magical ark.

They have collected inside the trunk books they selected in their secret expeditions up there. Their favourites, those they would always reread, the fuel of their infancy, the golden age, infinite and perfect, which their adult lives will draw upon. For good and for ill. They still do not know that that period will soon be interrupted by a loss; each one takes a book to leaf through its pages, sheltered by the blanket, letting themselves be transported to other planets, hunting for dragons, conquering kingdoms and sacred grails.

Jack opens *Morte D'Arthur* by Malory at the point where he closed it the time before. He thinks about what could be more desirable than that warmth, the grace of an old trunk that becomes the gateway to an imaginary world. A good story can warm your heart and bring you close to something true, so strong that it could even be mistaken for God. Jack feels himself rather part of a whole that unites creatures and generations in a double bind, Sir Thomas Malory and little Jack. A knight imprisoned in a dark secret, armed only with pen and an ink pot, and a child hiding in the attic, who soon will remain an orphan without a mother. Both looking for an impossible escape, of a dream of arms and adventures to pour over them their true hope. A challenge to men without imagination, who always afflict the world with their cruelty.

Jack is moved, his eyes mist up. He has never cried for joy and will soon have to do it for a too early farewell.

Seated in front of the window Jack dried his eyes. The same eyes, the same emotion, or rather nostalgia for that lost enchantment. He had entered the house without being heard and had remained seated waiting for dawn to spread behind the houses of Headington, listening to his own thoughts and the regular breathing of Max. The dog, immobile, had kept his muzzle on his leg to let him caress him.

Jack was looking outside. For too long he had tried to live sheltered from the emotion that was binding him to the memories of the past, in an attempt to keep his own life under tight control. The war had changed everything, exposing raw nerves and wounds. Now, while he was deciding to forget the events of the night that had just passed, to wipe them out like marks in the sand, the horror of the scars, the pain encased under the skin, the inflicted and suffered humiliation, the shameful kiss that had frozen his heart; now he knew he was ready to accept everything. Even to reopen the secret trunk and begin to write again, disregarding lukewarm criticism, and trying a different path from that of his heroes' poets. The path of Jack Lewis that from the bottom of the abyss, sooner or later, would bring him to meet other men like him. He would recognize them by looks, perhaps, or by what they would say. He would change again. The arrogance of youth was evaporating a little at a time, while the cold sun of December was inserting its rays between the chimneys.

In that first hour of the day, Jack found himself serene. And it was a beautiful discovery, a little before the noises would reach him from the upper storey. Janie and Maureen were getting up.

He took a deep breath, finding a smile in the corner of his tired face. He directed it to the dog with a last caress. He stood up and went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

47. The Grand Game

Before the tears could blur his sight, Andy managed to see again the man who was taking off his gloves, which he tucked in a canvas bag together with a knife and hid the bundle in the pocket of his coat. A bellows was blowing repeatedly. He heard the noise of a door closing. He attempted to talk, but he produced only a gasp. The morning light wounded his eyes like a red-hot blade, he did not want to close them, not yet, he remained hanging on to life by a thread with the desperation of the condemned. He spat blood and tried to take a deep breath, but the gash in his throat prevented him from holding it. The bellows did not stop pumping air idly. He rolled out of bed, on the stinking carpet. He would die as he had lived. No luck for Andy Mills. No rich man to take him away, no buyer for the story that he tried to sell to newspapers. A handful of sterling pounds in his pocket, and no more breath. A pitiless cold wrapped around him, the outline of shapes began to fade away into darkness. Andy noticed a marching platoon crossing a lunar landscape. Dirty and worn, their heads bowed, the men dragged themselves slowly in the land of shadow. He recognized them one by one, names, family names, service numbers. With the last effort he stood up, picked up his backpack and took a place in the line.

The man exited and left the door of the room open behind him and went down the stairs calmly. He crossed the small run-down hall and went out in the alley. He started walking fast. A few hundred metres and he entered the London Tower Bridge. He crossed it half way and stopped here to look at the Thames, gilded by the morning sun, like a traveler who wanted to imprint a memory to take with him. He pulled out the bundle from his pocket, he stuffed a lead ball into it, then let it fall down. He did not look down, resumed walking until he reached the other bank and a telephone booth.

In a few seconds he got the line.

“Callum speaking. The matter is settled, sir.”

“Very good.”

The man hung up and moved away, mixing with the crowd of employees walking towards the City. A thick line of identical individuals, anonymous like soldiers.

Winston Churchill caught the eye of the Secretary and drew a deep breath. More of bitterness than relief. He hardened his jaw, grinding the cigar between his teeth, he stared in space.

“They’re waiting,” murmured Marsh.

The Minister nodded.

“Just a minute.”

He pulled out something from the desk drawer, stood up and went to check his own image in the large mirror on the wall. He stared at those small, cunning eyes, set in a crooked, frog-like face. He wiped out a little ash from the pinstripe suit and put the ring on his finger nervously.

“He and I will do great things, Eddie.”

“I’m certain of this.”

Churchill nodded again to his doppelgänger.

“I’m ready. Let him in.”

The paintings of the battle were still there, but this time he did not stop to look at them. Feeling surrounded with all that imperial glory was already overwhelming enough. He preferred to stare at the tip of his shoes, at least until the voice of Professor Hogarth wrapped him like a warm embrace.

“Who would have thought that we will find ourselves here?”

The face of the old man transmitted the usual wit and the fatherly wisdom of all time. Ned thought that that man was a pillar, one of those on which empires rest.

He responded as if pronouncing a judgment.

“You’ve told me this, Professor. Not to give up.”

“In the end everything re-enters the game, my boy,” his tone did not hide his satisfaction. “Every action becomes part of a chain.” Hogarth laid his hands on his walking stick, and for a moment his ring reflected a gleam of light. “Things don’t happen the way we had predicted, but they happen. Our contribution, however small it can be, is always decisive.”

Ned remained silent.

“I have reflected for long,” resumed Hogarth in a vague tone. “I think that Feisal’s new kingdom should have an Arab name.”

The subject got Ned’s attention.

“It’ll be an Arab State, after all,” added the Professor. “And the Arabs have always called that region *Iraq*.” Hogarth inclined his head to the side, in a gesture typical of when he expressed a sincere curiosity. “Do you think Churchill will approve?”

“Certainly,” answered Ned seriously. “Compared to *Mesopotamia* it is a nice saving of ink.”

Hogarth chuckled. Then he patted the shoulders of the young man, perceiving his unsure mood.

At that moment the door at the end of the room was opened. In the doorway appeared the Minister together with his Secretary.

“Welcome, gentlemen.”

The old and the young man stood up. Hogarth moved first. The three men exchanged solid handshakes and turned towards Ned, still immobile.

“Colonel Lawrence.”

For a moment he seemed undecided what to do. He thought of a passage by Thomas Malory which he had reread many times over the years, in different situations, but which had never sounded as clear as at that moment.

Also Merlin made the Round Table in tokening of the roundness of the world, for by the Round Table is the world signified by right. For all the world, christian and heathen, repair unto the Round Table, and when they are chosen to be of the fellowship of the Round Table, they think them more blessed, and more in worship, than if they had gotten half the world.[xxxi]

He felt a slight dizziness. Then, one foot in front of the other, he crossed the room under the impassive looks of the deceased heroes, towards the complicit smiles waiting and the hands on the shoulders that accompanied him over the threshold.

Post Scriptum

Deià, Majorca, May 1935

One time they invited him to a wedding reception of aristocrats and peers of the kingdom. He introduced himself in the company of a young unknown, and to the butler asking for their

names said: “Mr. Lenin and Mr. Trotsky.” When they announced his presence in the hall, more than one glass ended up on the floor.

It would be enough to remember him this way and imagine him again travelling. He has fallen so many times that it is hard to believe that he will not get up again, sweeping the dust off his trousers.

The news arrived two days before, together with the requests from newspapers. Now that literature has made me famous enough to become even a good poet, they would like me to write an epitaph able to give coherence to his image, forging the bronze bust that fixes the thousand faces of the hero into one. But he has fought coherence all his life, surely I will not be the one to impose an order on him. I have been his friend and poet, I cannot ever be his historian or gravedigger.

Aesop narrates that one day a satyr saw a man blow into a bowl of soup to cool it and then on his own fingers to remove the frost from them. From that he deduced that he could not trust one who blows on heat and cold at the same time.

I cannot say if the moral of the fable suits our white prince, because the hot and cold breath that he gives out is tied to the facets of his soul and to the one who pretends to explain it. Until the end he nursed the curse of self-doubt which can become hostility towards himself and even a renunciation of everything one loves and esteems. On our side he understood that he was not a poet, his muse was dead and he wanted to wipe out his memory, not consecrate life to remembrance, even though this condemned him to an enduring misery.

In the years that separated us from our first meeting, he accustomed us to sudden disappearances and dramatic reappearances in the always frustrated attempts to escape the nostalgia for the limelight. He tried to return as a crusader monk, a servant of a great cause, later only as The Unknown Soldier, with new names, all precarious and insufficient to hide him from the public eye. A retreat under the spotlight at the end of which he found a blind curve and skidded off. Lately, he had taken refuge in the oily certainty of machines—planes, boats, motorcycles—it was precisely one of them which betrayed him, to the delight of the posthumous prophets of misfortune.

Now the historians will argue about the spoils of Britain’s Achilles, and his admirers will cover up the dark recesses of his soul with fig leaves and ceremonious hypocrisy. It is the destiny that heroes earn; individuals capable of mirroring themselves in pools of enemy blood and posing, as for a photograph, in front of the rubble of Troy or Jerusalem.

After all, heroes are only inventions of poets. And poets are human, sometimes shamans, who in the middle of ancient stone circles, prepare to conjure spirits. It is said that to conjure one spectre, intimate objects are needed: a sword, a king’s ring, a white mantle, a pen. Bringing the dead back to life is not such great magic. Few die completely, it is enough to blow on the ashes, to discover the embers still warm and rekindle the fire.

And who knows that one day, in a hundred years, someone will say the spell for us too, veteran warriors with dented armour.

As far I am concerned, I spent this time in finding the strength to evade an Arcadian exile, to leave the country for which I once died, the marriage, the white towers, the English countryside. I have said the truth to everyone and I have accepted the consequences for it. Nancy, Siegfried, Edmund, they have gone along the paths of life. My raft brought me to an island in the heart of the sea, from which everything originated, to the court of an ancient goddess who requests absolute devotion and grants her lovers the grace of poetry.

In the end I made my own choice. As Siegfried would say, the killed friends are wherever I go and I do not burn anymore in order to redeem their sins. I do not regret my old, wily, sweetness, and there is absolution in my songs.

Notes

[i]A pastoral poem by Mathew Arnold mourning the loss of a way of life (1853). The *Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Victorian Prose and Poetry*, ed. Lionel Trilling and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).

[ii]Lewis's original lines are from "Death in Battle" from his collection *Spirits in Bondage* (London: W. Heinemann, 1919): "Open the gates for me, / Open the gates of the peaceful castle, rosy in the West, / In the sweet dim Isle of Apples over the wide sea's breast / Open the gates for me!" (lines 1-4). The poem was first published in John Galsworthy's periodical *Reveille* 3 (Feb. 1919).

[iii]*Over the Brazier* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1916).

[iv]Books by Jonathan Swift (1725), William Morris (1876), and Edmund Spenser (1596), respectively.

[v]*Fairies and Fusiliers*, 1918 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1919).

[vi]One of the original Lost Tales which formed the basis for a section in his later work, *The Silmarillion*. A stand-alone, book-length version of the story was published in 2018. See *The Book of Lost Tales: Part II*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 144-220.

[vii]First published and edited by William Caxton, ca. 1485.

[viii](Cambridge UP, 1888), a travel book by Charles Montagu Doughty, an English poet, writer, and traveler, who had travelled in the Middle East and spent some time living with the Bedouins during the 1870s.

[ix]No. 26, *The Poems of Meleager*, trans. Peter Whigham and Peter Jay (Univ. of California P. 1975).

[x]*Over the Brazier.*

xiEdmund Rumpler was born in Vienna in 1872, and in 1910 he became the first aircraft manufacturer in Germany, building the famous “Etrich-Rumpler-Taube.”

xii(New York: Alfred Knopf, 1920).

xiii*The Pier-Glass* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1922).

xivThis is a paraphrased line from a poem by Thomas Hardy from *Wessex Poems* (New York: Harper, 1898) which begins: “I look into my glass, / And view my wasting skin” that ghosts Graves’s “The Face in the Mirror” from *Collected Works* (UK: Penguin 1958).

xv*The Christ of Cynewulf: A Poem in Three Parts*, ed. Albert Cook (Boston, MA: Ginn and Co., 1909).

xviBk. 11, ch. 1, *Le Morte D’Arthur: Sir Thomas Malory’s Book of King Arthur and of His Noble Knights of the Round Table. Ed. with an introduction by Sir Edward Strachey.* Globe ed. (London: Macmillan, 1919).

xvii*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. 1922. (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1997).

xviiiErnest Dowson, “Impenitentia Ultima,” *The Poems and Prose of Ernest Dowson* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1919).

xixAlso known as the Ottoman Porte or High Porte, it is a synecdochic metonym for the central government of the Ottoman Empire.

xxA comedy in five acts by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, first produced and published in 1775 in the UK.

[xxi]From the first version of Tolkien's poem "The Tale of Eärendel" written in 1914; see Christopher Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales II*, 267-69.

[xxii]A German, especially a soldier.

[xxiii]The date of the founding of All Souls College in Oxford.

[xxiv]French and British allies, wanting to take initiative away from Germany at Verdun, launched a large joint offensive at the Somme, where their fronts met. British generals called it the "Big Push," to break the trenches and carry them to victory.

[xxv]The contents from this letter excerpted in this chapter are from T. E. Lawrence's letter printed in *The Sundays Times*, Aug. 22, 1920. Rpt. as Letter 131, *Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938) 315-17.

[xxvi]The Spartacus League was a Marxist revolutionary movement organized in Germany during WW I. It was named after Spartacus, leader of the largest slave rebellion of the Roman Republic.

[xxvii]W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry,* ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1962).

[xxviii]Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: a Biography.* 1977. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 93-94.

[xxix]*Diaries of Lawrence*. Bodleian c 122, fols. 53-4; c 126, fol. 110.

[xxx]This paragraph is from Lawrence's letter to Frederic Manning, May 15, 1930. Rpt. as Letter 416 in *Letters of T. E. Lawrence.*

[xxxi]Malory bk. 14, ch. 2.

List of Historical Characters

Arthur James **Balfour,** 1st Earl of Balfour (1848-1930), British statesman of the Conservative Party who served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1902 to 1905. As Foreign Secretary from 1916 to 1919, he issued the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, declaring Palestine the home of the Jews.

Gertrude Margaret Lowthian **Bell** (1868-1926), English writer, traveller, political officer, administrator, and archaeologist, who explored, mapped, and became highly influential to British imperial policy-making due to her knowledge and contacts, built up through extensive travels in Greater Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, and Arabia.

Edmund Charles **Blunden** (1896-1974), English poet, author and critic. He wrote of his experiences in World War I in both verse and prose.

Lieutenant General James Thomas **Brudenell**, 7th Earl of Cardigan (1797-1868), an officer in the British Army who commanded the Light Brigade during the Crimean War. He led the Charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava.

John **Buchan** (1875-1940), Scottish novelist, historian, and Unionist politician who served as Governor General of Canada, the 15th since Canadian Confederation.

Richard Francis **Burton** (1821-1890), geographer, translator, writer, soldier, orientalist, cartographer, ethnologist, spy, linguist, poet, fencer, and diplomat. He was famed for his travels and explorations in Asia, Africa and the Americas, as well as his extraordinary knowledge of languages and cultures.

General Sir Henry George **Chauvel** (1865-1945), senior officer of the Australian Imperial Force who fought at Gallipoli and during the Sinai and Palestine campaign in the Middle Eastern theatre of the First World War.

Winston Leonard Spencer-**Churchill** (1874-1965), British politician, army officer, and writer, who was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955. In 1917 he served in the government under David Lloyd George as Minister of Munitions and was subsequently Secretary of State for War, Secretary of State for Air, then Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Michael **Collins** (1890-1922), Irish revolutionary, soldier and politician who was a leading figure in the early-20th-century Irish struggle for independence.

Lionel George **Curtis** (1872-1955), British official and author, who advocated British Empire Federalism and, late in life, a world state. His ideas concerning dyarchy were important in the development of the Government of India Act 1919. His writings included *The Commonwealth of Nations* (1916).

George Nathaniel **Curzon**, Earl (1859-1925), British statesman, Viceroy of India (1898-1905), and Foreign Secretary (1919-24), who during his terms in office played a major role in British policy making.

Dahoum—Selim Ahmed (ca. 1897-1916), also called Dahoum, meaning "little dark one," a Syrian Arab who worked with T. E. Lawrence at a prewar archaeological dig at Carchemish.

Sir Arthur John **Evans** (1851-1941), English archaeologist and pioneer in the study of Aegean civilization in the Bronze Age, who is most famous for unearthing the palace of Knossos on the Greek island of Crete. Evans continued Heinrich Schliemann's concept of a Mycenaean civilization, but he found that he needed to distinguish another civilization, the Minoan, from the structures and artifacts found there and throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Brigadier-General Sir Gilbert Falkingham **Clayton** (1875-1929), British Army intelligence officer and colonial administrator, who worked in several countries in the Middle East in the early 20th century. In Egypt, during WWI as an intelligence officer, he supervised those who worked to start the Arab Revolt. In Palestine, Arabia and Mesopotamia, in the 1920s as a colonial administrator, he helped negotiate the borders of the countries that later became Israel, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

General Erich Georg Anton **von Falkenhayn** (1861-1922), the Chief of the German General Staff during the First World War from 1914 until 1916.

Sinn Féin ("Ourselves" or "We Ourselves)," a left-wing Irish republican political party active in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Sinn Féin organization was founded in 1905 by Arthur Griffith.

David Lloyd **George** (1863-1945), British prime minister (1916–22), who dominated the British political scene in the latter part of WWI and was raised to the peerage in the year of his death.

David George **Hogarth** (1862-1927), also known as D. G. Hogarth, was a British archaeologist and scholar/professor. He was Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford from 1909 to 1927.

Sir Edward Howard **Marsh** 1872-1953), British polymath, translator, arts patron and civil servant, the sponsor of the Georgian school of poets and a friend to many poets, including Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon. He worked as Private Secretary to a succession of the United Kingdom's most powerful ministers, particularly Winston Churchill.

John Edward **Masefield** (1878-1967), English poet and writer, was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom from 1930.

Mehmed VI: (1861-1926), the 36th and last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, reigning from 1918 to 1922. He was removed from the throne when the Ottoman sultanate was abolished in 1922.

Colonel Richard **Meinertzhagen** (1878-1967), a British soldier, intelligence officer and ornithologist who had a distinguished military career in Africa and the Middle East, and who supported the Palestine declaration in favour of Zionists.

Alfred **Milner**, Sir (1854-1925), British administrator whose pursuit of British sovereignty while he was high commissioner in South Africa and governor of the Cape Colony helped to bring about the South African War (1899–1902).

Lady Ottoline Violet Anne **Morrell** (1873-1938), English aristocrat and society hostess. Her patronage was influential in artistic and intellectual circles, where she befriended writers including Aldous Huxley, Siegfried Sassoon, T. S. Eliot, and D. H. Lawrence.

Ismail Enver **Pasha** (1881-1922), Ottoman military officer and leader of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. He became the main leader of the Ottoman Empire in both the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and in WWI (1914–18).

William Matthew Flinders **Petrie** (1853-1942), archeologist who first went to Egypt in 1880 at the age of 26, to survey the Great Pyramid before turning in the 1920s to the archaeology of Palestine. He saw his life as a mission to rescue archaeology - to retrieve as much information as possible from sites that were shrinking dramatically in size as Egypt modernized.

Ezra Weston Loomis **Pound** (1885-1972), an expatriate American poet and critic, as well as a major figure in the early modernist poetry movement. His contribution to poetry began with his development of Imagism, a movement derived from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, stressing

clarity, precision, and economy of language. He later extended the definition of Imagisme to art, naming it Vorticism.

Sir Cecil **Rhodes** (1853-1902), a British businessman, mining magnate and politician in South Africa who served as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896. An ardent believer in British imperialism, Rhodes wanted to expand the British Empire because he believed that the Anglo-Saxon race was destined to greatness. He founded the Rhodes scholarship.

Sir Henry **Wilson** (1864-1922), British Director of Military Operations in the years immediately prior to war in 1914, and ultimately as Chief of the Imperial General Staff in 1918.

Sir Charles Leonard **Woolley** (1880-1960), British archaeologist best known for his excavations at Ur in Mesopotamia.

Siegfried Loraine **Sassoon**, (1886-1967), English poet, writer, and soldier. Decorated for bravery on the Western Front, he became one of the leading poets of WWI. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches and satirized the patriotic pretensions of those responsible for the war.

Wilfred Edward Salter **Owen,** (1893-1918), English poet and soldier. One of the leading poets of WWI, his war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare was heavily influenced by his mentor Siegfried Sassoon, and stood in stark contrast both to the public perception of war at the time and to the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets. Owen was killed in action on 4 November, 1918.

Heinrich **Schliemann** (1822-1890), German archaeologist and excavator of Troy, Mycenae, and Tiryns. He is sometimes considered to be the modern discoverer of prehistoric Greece, though scholarship in the late 20th and early 21st centuries revealed that much self-mythologizing was involved in establishing his reputation.

Johann Joachim **Winckelmann** (1717-1768), German art historian and archaeologist. He was a pioneering Hellenist who first articulated the difference between Greek, Greco-Roman and Roman art. Winckelmann was one of the founders of scientific archaeology and first applied the categories of style on a large, systematic basis to the history of art.

Author's Note and Acknowlegements

The main characters in this story are real. However, I have taken the liberty of filling in the gaps in their biographies, of fictionalizing or inventing the circumstances of their meetings, of adapting the historical events which they were involved in to literary purposes. That renders this book a work of imagination.

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TRANSLATORS

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Maurizio Vito holds a *laurea* in Philosophy from the University of Verona and a Ph.D. in Italian Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. His first book *Terra e Mare. Metafore e politica in conflitto* was published in 2012. He published extensively both in English and in Italian. Currently, he holds a position as Lecturer at the University of Oklahoma.