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The Wager

HAZARD RULES OUR LIVES, or so it has seemed to me. Does the philosopher, sulky and parched from demanding whys and wherefores from Plato and Plotinus, command more of destiny than a common gamester who rides carelessly on a die-roll into the unknown? Are the virtuous, the provident, the industrious, better rewarded than a bold young rake with a well-turned leg who rushes fortune like a dairymaid in a hayloft? Does any plan of life compare with the accident of birth? Is any quality more enviable than luck? When I was rising to manhood, when I bucked like a wild colt among the ladies of Dublin and London, I thought the only men worth knowing were gamesters at heart. I was ready to lay a bet on anything—on the fate of a battle in Germany or the ricochet of a billiard ball, on a cockfight or the color of the vicar's urine, on the longevity of a virgin's maidenhead or the progress of two flies crawling up a windowpane in the smoky games room at White's. In short, I shared the general distemper of my age. Gaming was the ruling passion in our society, and the greatest leveler. The rattle of a dice-box or the flutter of a deck of cards was a wonderful solvent for snobbery. I have seen a duke sit down to loo with his footman, and a marchioness to picquet with a two-guinea doxy from Moll King's bawdy-house. The card table—and a gathering reputation for staying power that I labored manfully to earn—assisted my entry into the beds of more ladies of fashion than it would be prudent to recall by name. I am generally pretty lucky, even at long odds. But fortune turned against me with a vengeance soon after the accession of our new King George, the third of our German dumplings, and on a dank, drizzly day in London in the spring of 1761, I was misfortunate enough to accept a wager that brought all the Furies beating on my head. The nature of this bet was extraordinary, even among a set that was voracious for novelty. I laid money on whether a man would take his own life.

As a result of this wager, I was soon obliged to abandon all my hopes of an easy life in England and of glory on the London stage. My fortunes became inextricably entwined with those of the

madman who was the subject of my bet. Sir Robert Davers had flashes of pure genius, but he was dangerous to know. He carried an abyss inside him; his most brilliant insights sucked away reason, as through a funnel into the Void. Yet, in the sudden wreckage of my prospects in England, I was mad enough to accept his proposal to cross the seas in a tub like a floating coffin, to try my luck in the American colonies. I was plunged into the nightmare of an Indian revolt. I survived to see things I had never hoped to see in this lifetime. I saw living men vivisected, flayed and roasted. I was invited to sup the broth of white men's bones. I would have joined them in the native cooking-pots, save for my luck with the ladies. *That* has seldom failed me.

As a captive among the Indians and later as an agent for the Indian Department, I came to know the general of the native revolt as well, I believe, as any white man. His name once loosened bowels in all our American settlements, and was dinned in street ballads at Covent Garden. He shook the British Empire worse than any rebel until George Washington and the Bostonians got up their mutiny. He made a fair bid to drive the white colonists into the sea and damn-near cost us the whole of America west of the Alleghenies. Yet who, outside a few frontiersmen in greasy buckskins, not given to quill-driving, knows anything of Pontiac the man? I knew Pontiac in various guises—as a sadistic butcher; as a dream-hunter at home with the unseen; as a military strategist, cool as any marshal of France; as a betrayed, dispossessed wanderer, crazed and wretched as Lear. I wrote a play about him in an effort to show the public his true colors. But they would not touch my script at Drury Lane, or even at Smock Alley. Garrick told me my depiction was “muddy” and “insufficiently noble.” According to that great ham, playgoers will only tolerate a principal who is all hero or all villain—as if there is anyone outside a stage who fits such a bill. I told Garrick he might keep his opinions and his ignorance of men.

I am now resolved to suspend my hopes of a stage production and to tell my story just as it happened, starting with that dank day in April when I took a chance on a man committing self-murder.

I was staying with Peg Walsingham, on the same side of Leicester Fields as Sir Joshua Reynolds, and there were a dozen men of sufficient taste to hate me for it. Peg, I suppose, was the wrong side of forty; her glory days on the stage were behind her. She would sow no more heartache as the dying Cordelia in teasing disarray.

The bucks of my generation—the sons or younger brothers of the rakes who beat down the green room door to get at Peg—now flung their bouquets at Jane Pope, a pert little soubrette twenty years her inferior. Peg did not smoke herself in nostalgia. She was grateful for what she was born with—a mind as quick as a cat on a grounded bird, a red-gold mane that smelled like burned toast in sunlight, a body that was lithe and brimming, shaped for the ruin of the ruder sex and that astonishing, irresistible voice that could whip up the gentry of the pit into hot frenzy or plunge them down into white-lipped, trembling despair. She was thankful to London, for all it had given her. When you heard the purity of her diction or saw her whisked along the Strand in her sedan chair between liveried footmen, grand as any duchess, it was hard to believe she was born and reared in Dublin, a flower-seller's daughter. I think Peg was also grateful to me. To a boy of nineteen, as I was then, the wonderful thing about the love of an older woman is that she gives you a better education than any university and she thanks you for it.

Peg was up before noon though we had flourished until dawn after the masked ball at the Mansion House. The drab, soggy day, or the prodigious quantities of champagne and claret we had imbibed the night before, had worked on her spirits. I tunneled under the covers, but she banged around so brutally with the tea-equipage that I was forced to acknowledge the day.

When she saw me wiping the sleep from my eyes, Peg declared, as brisk as if we had breakfasted on her theme, "You'll leave me when you've used me up. You'll see me going to tea with the ladies, fat and sedate as a parson's widow when you are prancing by in a fancy rig, and your smart young bride will say, 'Who's that old woman? Do you know her?' And your eyes will be bright and vacant as mica, or you'll say, 'That *used* to be Peg Walsingham. Can you believe men used to buy her champagne?'"

"What abject nonsense!" I was flat on my back like the king of hearts, in the purple taffeta housecoat she had sent for from Jermyn Street. "You'll bury me first!"

"Liar!"

She leaned over me, enclosing me in the curtain of her tawny hair. She smelled of orange-flower water and cinnamon toast.

"Liar!" she repeated. "I'll buy you your wedding suit."

She reached to replace her cup on the tea-tray and wriggled her admirable rump closer to me on the wrinkled bedclothes.

"Only if you come on the honeymoon."

This coaxed an evanescent smile. It barely stirred her features, but it glowed for a moment, behind her skin.

“Liar! I shall order the suit from Maxwell’s. You can’t be trusted at a tailor without a woman’s guidance. You’ll come out looking as if you’ve been in a sheep dip.”

“I don’t know any women but you, and you are married already.”

“Shameless deceiver! You can’t keep your breeches buttoned! I saw you looking at that trollop last night—the one with her chest sticking out like a Christmas goose. You know who I mean. Don’t give me sheep’s eyes, Shane Hardacre! You’ll move on, and on, and on. You’ll marry for money when you grow up. Gaius and I will be your counselors. He’ll tell you what they’re worth, and I’ll tell you what they’re thinking. Don’t you think we would make the most remarkable *entremetteurs*? Perhaps we could advertise.”

“My love—”

“I’m not feeling sorry for myself! Don’t flatter yourself on that account! It’s the one you will marry that is to be pitied. There’s no stable door that will hold you. There’s the devil in you, Shane Hardacre, red-eyed and poky as a jackrabbit.”

“Sure ’tis the wimmin is worse than the men, They was dragged down to hell and was thrown out again—”

The old tavern song just bubbled up, like toddy stirred by a hot poker.

Peg snatched a fistful of my hair, which hung loose across my shoulders, and gave it a wrench that made me yelp. Then she softened and drew my drowsy face up to her bosom. The creamy tops of her breasts swelled above her shift. A roguish ringlet vanished into the cleft. I liked her best like this, without artifice, before she was patched and powdered and rouged, the fullness of hips and breasts springing free from hoops and stays.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed, diverted by a white gleam in the pier glass between the windows that gave onto the balcony. “What am I thinking of! I have no face!”

“You are quite perfect.” I kissed her mouth and hung greedily on her lower lip, swollen as if a bee had stung it. Boldly, I slipped my hand between her knees and slid it upwards, canting back the yellow silk of her shift. She twisted her thighs to refuse me, but when I pouted she laughed and tugged at the sash of my robe. She found me ready for her. She ran her tongue from the root to the hard knob of my sex and indulged me with a thousand little caresses. The yellow silk fluttered away like a blown petal. She mounted her thighs about my hips, taking and giving with the same motions. She floated high above me, chafing the subtle mound inside the mouth

of her mysteries. Then slowly, deliberately, she impaled herself, like a dreaming witch on her broomstick. In children's stories, witches treat broomhandles more decorously, but this is not a tale for children. Slowly, slowly, with long, inverted strokes, pestle over mortar, her ripe breasts brushing my face, lover and nurturer. Higher and deeper, into the rich loam. Ravening, feeding. The blood-tides, shining under her skin. The red-yellow bird, beating wings of smoke that burst from above her heart; I could not see it with my eyes open. The scream that carried the lungs and belly with it when she flew above me and set neighbors' dogs yapping and made the milk-seller's dray bolt for Covent Garden. The patter of rain on the tiles. The tears, gleaming like rain on her white skin.

"Bastard. Three words, and you could not find them."

What imp had possessed her?

I said sulkily, "I suppose you wish me to say that I love you."

Her lip trembled. I thought she might hit me.

She spoke very slowly, holding down the pain and anger. "I want you to tell me I am beautiful."

"You are more than that."

"I want you to tell me I'll never be old and ugly."

"Mrs Walsingham, you are immortal."

"You are a child, Shane. A saucy child with a dirty big truncheon. If you weren't excessively pretty, I shouldn't put up with you for an instant! You're almost too pretty for a boy. That's why Gaius likes you. You know Gaius fancies you, don't you?"

"Mmmph." Our romp had brought on a delicious lethargy. I had no desire to talk about Peg's exquisitely decadent husband or to hear any more of her lecture.

She ran her index finger from the roots of my hair to the hollow of my chin.

"Not a wrinkle, damn you. You'll grow up soon enough, and then you'll leave me. I won't try to hold you, *chéri*. I can't abide women who cling. As if we can ever possess another human soul! But I won't let you leave too easily."

She bit the side of my neck, just deep enough to leave her brand. She sighed, and covered her limbs with a rose quilted wrapping gown. Why in blazes was she rattling on about youth and age and bittersweet regrets? Surely she was not still angry because I had strutted a cotillion with a languid slut whose décolletage was a masterpiece of suspension engineering. It occurred to me that one of the servants might have tattled about my taking a hasty gallop with the Reynolds's new parlor maid, a frisky little filly from Aberdeen. But it was unlike Peg to be jealous, and beneath her dignity to

show it. I don't believe she cared two pins what pranks I played with domestics, or with the bouncing betsyies along the Strand or in Vauxhall Gardens, so long as I did not shame her or bring home the clap—or develop any serious attachment. From her long study of my sex, Peg had formed the settled opinion that a man will make love to the hind end of a mule and that a wise woman makes room for the tendency. Of the pair of us, I was the one who tended to get prickly when Peg spent an hour or two with an old beau—even over tea and cucumber sandwiches at her sister's—even when the admirer in question was a sober-shanked old fart, bald as a pumpkin under his bagwig, who was something high up in a bank and droned on about shares and bubbles.

Perhaps it was merely the damp of London worming into the marrow. Perhaps she had detected the mark of an enemy in the glass, the unwanted trace of a crow's foot at the corner of one of those dazzling eyes. Who knows the heart of a woman?

I watched her stealthily from under my lashes as she set to work with a brush and a battery of paints and powders. She tied a white cloth around her neck, like a trancherman warming to his work in an oyster house. She dabbed wistfully at the blue-gray shadows below her eyes. The eyes were very green today, under the dark wings of her lashes. She tilted her head back and made a round o with her mouth. She ran her thumbs under her lower jaw, pushing back the loose flesh that threatened the start of a double chin.

I loved her little imperfections as much as she resented them. They fed my vanity. I was selfish and unformed. I had always been spoiled by women, starting with my mother and my sister Susannah, who first showed me what is under a girl's skirts. I expected to be adored. In a stupid way, the physical reminders of the life that Peg had used up—of her experience and her *need*—reassured me that in our partnership, I was the one who would be constantly pampered and indulged. I suppose you find this objectionable, even repugnant. What's that? Morals of a whore? Come now, I was not Peg's gigolo, at least, not entirely. I had a hundred a year of my own which my father sent me to keep me out of Ireland, since I had rogered the Earl of Eastmeath's daughter Mirabel and run off with her to be married by a couples beggar at a furtive ceremony among the ruins of Monasterboice—an episode I had never confided to Peg. Of course, a hundred a year would barely support my habits for a month in London's fashionable society. I allow that I was a half-kept man, but I gave value for my privileges. You say I should be ashamed of myself? That is uncivil. I was nineteen. I had no more idea of who I was than of heaven and hell.

I spied on Peg as she glued a patch to the rise of her cheekbone and a second near the corner of her mouth. She was very near perfect, even at forty. The little marks of weathering did not diminish her beauty; they made it less daunting. Flawless beauty in a woman makes a sensitive man uneasy and spawns terrors in a jealous one. Women can be trapped by beauty of this sort, as Midas starved among all his gold. They are reduced to surfaces, and presumed to have no more inner life than an Attic sculpture. The most beautiful women I know—apart from Peg—are the property of consummate boors or of hairless old men with more in their pocket than between their legs. They invite the jealousy of Venus, they suffer the ordeals of Psyche whom the goddess compelled to fetch black water from a place of terror at the source of the River Styx, before they are allowed happiness on this earth.

Peg called to me to bestir myself. She expected her hairdresser at any moment. Then she was to call on Mr Beard to discuss a new musical for the Covent Garden Theater. She would take tea with her sister, in South Audley Street.

She gave me a worried look. Her eyebrows made very nearly a straight line. She did not tell me then that her unease came from an obscure presentiment of disaster, that she had roused with a start from a dream imbued with a kind of fatality, one of those dark visions, both fantastic and intensely real, from which the waking mind flinches. She had seen me lost in a thorny wood, trying to bull a passage between spectral trees that wept tears of black blood as I broke their twigs, but would not set me free. She had called to guide me, but I was deaf to her cries. She did not tell me that her foreboding was not for herself, but for me. Had she been more open, no doubt I would have blamed her nightmare on the food at Bedford's. In any event, I think it was beyond her power to alter what came to pass; the dice were already in play.

"Don't forget you are dining with Gaius tonight," she told me. "Wear your new silk. It agrees with your coloring." She fussed about my warm cloak and the need to take a coach, because of the rawness of the season.

"I always do what I'm told."

"Liar!"

It was love of the stage that had brought Peg and me together: that, and the sense that we were exiles even in our native country.

I first opened my lungs to demand liquid refreshment not ten leagues from the storied hill of Tara, in a green valley of Meath. My father traced his bloodline back to the high kings of Ulster,

but my mother never permitted any of us to refer to ourselves as Irishmen at home. She reminded us daily that we were English, foaled by happenstance on the wrong side of the Irish sea. Home was somewhere else.

Her insistence that nobody connected with our family could conceivably be Irish was a puzzle for my father. He had never set foot in England. The only English blood he could sniff out in his own pedigree was contributed by a rough bog-trooper in the reign of Elizabeth of England who flourished my father's great-great-something without asking the lady's consent and abstracted himself without asking her name. My father was raised plain Jimmy MacShane, and *his* father was Irishman enough to fight for the last of our Catholic kings in the bloody meadow beside the River Boyne.

I never blamed my father for denying the ditch where he was digged. The worst that can be said of him is, he was no braver than the next man. I have read in the London magazines, in the accounts of Mr Arthur Young and other recent English tourists, that the severity of the Penal Laws has been relaxed of late in Ireland and that an Irishman no longer faces destitution or violent death for affirming his racial identity or the faith of his forefathers. It may be that the loss of our American plantations has taught His Majesty that colonists require temperate handling. But in the early part of our century, when Jimmy MacShane met Frances Dempster, conditions were sterner.

They were an improbable match. My mother's relations in the Home Counties dispose of a minor peerage and a pocket borough in the Tory interest. My father, after the confiscation of his family estates, was little better than a vagabond. Under the laws of Ireland, so long as he remained a papist, he could not own the land under his feet, or a pair of dueling pistols, or a horse worth above five guineas. He was unemployable in his native county. His only recourse was to abandon his home—to go for a sailor, to join the Wild Geese, or emigrate to the colonies—or else to repair his fortunes by interbreeding with the new owners of Ireland, or at least their sub-agents. This would require him to forswear his identity.

I decline to sit in judgement on the choice he made. Under the same circumstances, I would no doubt have made the same choice with less hesitation. I have never had difficulty changing my disguises, out of necessity, or for pure sport. I believe a man ought to make it his business to cram several lives into a single span. I have heard many accounts of heaven and hell, and stranger reports from savages who are as conversant with the invisible planes as are you

and I, dear reader, with an alehouse or a bawdy-house. But I shall continue to try my luck with what I can see and touch, with what I can get my teeth into, or my leg over. It may be that delectable houris or the smelly pit await me in the great beyond, but I shall go on—while God give me breath—squeezing every last modicum of pleasure from the life I have for certain sure, and in that cause, I shall not hesitate to change my role as often as it suits me, or entertains the ladies.

My father, however, nourished all manner of scruples, and was seized, after two or three bottles, with the trembling fear that, in changing his religion, he had consigned his soul to hell-fire. Thus he was never happy. But I suspect he could never have been happy—as Irishman or pretend-Englishman—in the society he knew. Only a cheerful villain could be happy in the Ireland of those times, and my father was ever a reluctant scoundrel. For all the rum-shrub he tossed down his gullet, he could never drown out the ghost of his conscience. He could never forgive himself for being a sold man, though Lord knows there are many who have sold themselves for less.

In brief, my father entered into a business arrangement to relieve the difficulties of the prosperous family of a lady in distress. Frances Dempster was already past her prime, and she was never a great beauty. Those who were kindly disposed called her homely, or horsy. It was no doubt out of quiet desperation that she lay with a Dublin attorney, notorious as a blazer and a womanizer. This decayed rake may have promised her marriage, but I am inclined to doubt it. The man was married already to a lady of fashion who graced the Lord Lieutenant's arm, patched and rouged, with a diamond aigrette in her hair, at Castle balls. No, I believe my mother had simply reached the point where she could no longer contain the roiling passions compressed within her without forfeiting either health or sanity. In her matter-of-fact, wholly English way, she dealt with the situation by presenting her maidenhead to the most notorious seducer in the small world of the Pale.

This dalliance brought the predictable reward. When her belly began to swell under her hooped petticoats, her outraged family resolved to buy her a husband. My father was available. The incentives were a dowry, relief from the bailiffs, the prospect of secure employment as estate manager for my mother's absentee cousins at the Manor of Waryne and a place among that privileged, rootless gentry, unique in our age, that clover-boys call West Britons. Thus my father agreed to drink to the damnation of the Pope and to celebrate his nuptials in the bosom of the Established Church, which

he had formerly described as a public convenience, devised by Henry VIII to solemnize his leg-over operations. There remained the question of the family name.

A Dempster could not be demoted to a MacShane. My father's name was as sooty as a peat fire, though his people heard in its rough syllables the skirl of the way pipes of their ancient kinsmen, the O'Neills of Tyrone.

An imp of defiance led my father to announce that he would change his name to Hardacre, the only English name in his blood-stock, and the one name his people had always tried to forget, since it belonged to that rude bog-trooper who ravished one of our women.

The Dempsters sniffed. They did not find the smell of potatoes, blackened by the fire. But Hardacre was a common, cloddish name, nonetheless. Why not Hardcastle? Or Johnson, in honor of my father's kinsmen at Smithstown, who had also turned Englishmen and were connected by marriage to the illustrious Sir Peter Warren, the victor of Louisbourg?

Jimmy MacShane held his ground. He would be Jimmy Hardacre, or he would keep the name he was born with, and if it did not smell sweet enough to the Dempsters, then let his tarnished fiancée go hang. He got his way.

After I was delivered—weighing above nine pounds and raging for a drink—my mother dressed up the rough cognomen by having me christened Vivian, one of those ambiguous, feathery names much in vogue among our debutantes' delights. Vivian sat on Hardacre like a macaroni wig atop a charcoal burner. My father never called me Vivian. He called me Shane. In the shut-up times, when icicles formed inside the windows of the gray stone house at Waryne, he told me stories of Shane O'Neill, the Beast of Ireland, who paid court to Elizabeth of England by marching through her court with his banners flying and his red hair streaming off his shoulders, raising a war cry that carried the heart and the belly with it, until he hurled himself full-length on the flags before her feet.

For as long as I can remember, I wished to be an actor. As a boy, I made a collection of hats. In my father's old beaver, with the brim turned down and a goosefeather stuck in the crown, I was Raleigh, trouncing the Spaniards on a bright blue sea, or Roland spurring to battle against the Moors. In a farrier's leather cap, I was Con-Edda on his hero's quest for the black stallion and the golden apples of the fairy kingdom under the shadowed waters of Lough Erne. In a woolly nightcap, I was dark Othello declaiming love, or

Caliban plotting slave revolt. I conscripted the tenants' children to play supporting roles in my productions. But my most lively characters came to me when I was alone, and they came, not from the pages of storybooks, or from Shakespeare, but from wayward fancy. These characters, plucked from the air, inhabited me so fully that, for days at a stretch, I spoke in their accents and walked after their fashion. They traveled with me on my long walks over the meadows and down narrow lanes walled with blackthorn, to the turrets of the nearby Manor of Killeen. They sat with me at the dinner-table and at lessons with Mr Horsfall, my tutor, until my mother waxed fierce and shrill and Mr Horsfall took up his switch and Maureen, the cook, started crossing herself and babbling about Devil's work. There was a pattern to this nonsense. When one of my favorites became too vehement, or too preachy, and began to weary me, together with the rest of the household, the hat that infallibly summoned his presence would be mysteriously mislaid for a time, while I assumed the manners of a new-born character. After an interval, I would retrieve the missing hat, and the banished favorite would stage a revival, livelier than before. I thought the lines that frothed from my lips when I played these games were more fun than any blank verse, and started inscribing them in a book. I conceived that my vocation was to be not only a player, but a maker of plays and resolved never to rest content with a prosy life.

My father was more tolerant of these conceits than my mother, no doubt because he had accepted a life of playacting. On the sabbath, he sat in our family pew, with the high-backed seats, and the satin cushions, playing at country squire. He would nod off during the sermons, wake with a start and peer about to see if any of our tenants were in the same state. If his eye fell on a man who was dozing, or gossiping, he would stand up and rebuke him by name in front of the minister. "You there! Patrick Nolan! Eyes front!" I do not think the tenants held it against him. He was a fair man to those who belonged on the estate. But he had little charity for anyone else. He affected not to see the tribes of starving beggars, hollow and ragged as scarecrows, who spilled out into our lanes in early summer when the cotters had eaten the last of their potatoes. I have seen him whip up the horses at the first glimpse of those ashen, sunless faces and bowl them into the ditch—even mothers with babes in arms—without the acknowledgement of an oath or a backward look. His eye slid away from the sooty burrows and birds' nests of mud and thatch where the cotters huddled in hollows between the stone walls of the great estates. I think he turned his back on the misery of Ireland, not because he was

heartless, but because he cared too much. He could no more recognize things as they were, and carry on in his role as a pretended English gentleman, than the play can go on when the mob from the pit is allowed to take over the stage. Instead, he devoted himself to the recreations of his adopted class, the most irresponsible governing caste that Europe—and, I warrant, the world—has ever seen. Each season, he would vie with the neighboring gentry to be first to carry up a shipment of fresh limes from Cork. Then Mick Dooley or Paddy Nolan would be sent off on a pacer to raise the cry of “Fresh fruit!” and every half-mounted gentleman within earshot would gather at our house to drench himself in rum-shrub until not one was left who could hold a seat. My father kept a pack of indifferent hounds and chased fox-tails—and sometimes a bush priest, which he vowed was better sport—over hedge and stile. He kept no books in his library save the King James Bible and the *Sportsman’s Guide*. He knew twenty-seven rhyming toasts, not repeatable before ladies, and he knew how to knock the stem off a wine-glass so a guest has no chance of retiring from a drinking bout until his host, or his supply of claret, is exhausted. He doggedly aped the Tory Fox-Hunter in the *Spectator*. But there was scant merriment in his diversions and certainly little humor. He gnawed and worried and dragged at his pleasures as a beaver works on its dam. He for ever needed to satisfy himself that he had exacted a sufficient reward for a marriage as cozy as Mrs Wright’s wax tableau of King Charles under the headsman’s axe which gave me the shivers when I saw it in Chudleigh Court.

My father was no born actor. He could neither suspend his own disbelief in his role nor persuade others to believe him in it. Yet I must credit Jimmy Hardacre with one grand performance. He persuaded me to love him as a father, and I have never thought of any other man in that connection. Even in his black dog fits—when he went for me with a leather belt, or an oak staff, until I was big enough to vow to thrash him in return if he tried it again—he never mentioned the name of my mother’s seducer. His forbearance was the more remarkable because, in appearance, we were polar opposites. My father was of less than middling height, stubby and thick, with crinkly black hair on his head and black, curling hairs on the back of his white, clumsy hands. By the age of fifteen, when I went down to Trinity, I stood better than a head taller with a quantity of fine-spun, chestnut hair and broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist that has since been sacrificed in causes that lead, so Dante would have us believe, to the Third Circle of the Inferno.

“O’Neill hair!” my father once cried in his cups when one of my mother’s English relations remarked on my coloring. My mother smiled and said distinctly, “It is plain to all eyes that my son was bred to higher things than a sheepfold.” My mother used words on my father with the murderous precision of a witch sticking pins in a doll. She used me to needle his most vulnerable spot. If she had ever provoked him into raising a hand against her, or calling me another man’s spawn, I believe she would have seized on that as the excuse to leave him and go to her Dempster cousins, which would have surely been best for both of them. But he turned his violence into other channels, including my backside, or let it boil inside until the heat in his brain dropped him like a dead man, and he never denied me my birthright, such as it was.

My mother bore him four more children. My brothers, Evelyn and Beverly, died in infancy, no doubt throttled by the names she had loaded on their necks. My sisters, Susannah—who gave me my first daylight view of what lies beneath a skirt—and Annabel, were hardier, like all the women of my family. I was always my father’s favorite, even when my brothers were still of this world. I think the true reason was that my siblings were the issue of blind butting in the dark in a loveless bed, while my father believed, in his fuddled way, that somehow he had *chosen* me.

He taught me to ride, to knock down a fair dinner with a gun, to hold my liquor, and to recognize a shaved ball on a billiard table and a loaded die at hazard. These were more useful skills than I gleaned from my tutor who taught me enough Latin to allow me to puzzle out the naughty bits in Catullus and later, in Mr Gibbon’s footnotes. My father’s botched attempt to play-act a life taught me something more important yet, by negative example. We are hurled into this world like understudies summoned in the middle of a performance. We are nervous of forgetting our lines; we gabble them under our breath as we wait in the wings. Then we are thrust on stage and receive a greater shock. The play is not the one we prepared for. Worse, the sets and the characters change from one moment to the next, and the critics up in the gods are unfriendly; one false note and they shower us with bottles and sucked-out oranges. We are obliged to live off our wits, to improvise from one moment to the next, to exchange roles as the audience and the ever-changing cast demand. My father was never happy in the part he played. He did not invent it, and it was beyond his wit to change it. I resolved to do better. If I could not choose the play, I would at least choose the part—comic foil over tragic hero, since the hero rarely keeps the lady, or his own hide—and change as quick as the temper of the pit.

Gaius Walsingham maintained that our hearts become more refined as they become more corrupt. I doubt that this statement was original; very little about Peg's husband was that, including his first name. He loved to tell strangers that he had borrowed it from his hero, Gaius Caligula, whose bust commanded the place of honor in the bay window of his library at Twickenham with its back to the river. He was christened Guy Randolph Saint John, and his family had made more money shipping slaves to the sugar islands than he and Peg together had managed to spend. This was no doubt the principal reason she married him. I am not sure why Gaius married at all. He was not, as we say, the marrying kind. Perhaps it amused him to show her off, as it amused him to display portraits of himself by Reynolds and Pompeo Batoni, or his collection of pornographic engravings rescued, so he claimed, from the private hoard of a medieval pope. He may have looked on a beautiful wife as a Venus fly-trap, who would lure an unending procession of good-looking young men into his ambit. It is commonly believed that a man of his type takes a wife to disguise his true inclinations. I do not think that was true of Gaius. He made no secret of his preference and he delighted in shocking other people; he went to a ball at the Mansion House dressed as the Empress Maria Theresa. I suspect, that he married Peg because he needed a friend and confessor to supply an element of constancy in the gaudy flutter of his existence, and perhaps because—prior to that evening—Peg was one person he had never managed to shock. Whatever the origins of the marriage, the Walsinghams had not shared the same house for years, and they had not shared the same bed since the day they came home from their honeymoon in Venice where I picture them making eyes at the same hairy boatman.

Gaius claimed to know everyone worth knowing in London. He had undertaken to introduce me to the "right people." No doubt he had his reasons for patronizing his wife's lover, as Peg made out. But he had made no advances that would have embarrassed both of us, apart from a silly episode when he had drunk too deep at the Beefsteak. I made full use of his hospitality, because he had a wicked sense of humor, and because, in his company, doors rolled smoothly open that would have been resolutely barred against an Irish interloper.

The rain abated in the late afternoon. The lamp-lighters were out as I strolled down Piccadilly towards White's; my shadow walked for half a block behind me. The house fronts were dark, but from under a sky like fine ash, red fire licked at my face, so fierce that it hurt my eyes. Its reflection bloodied standing water in puddles and

gutters and brought strangeness into that familiar thoroughfare. I was glad to round the corner onto St James's Street, and mount the steps to Gaius's nest of Old Etonians.

Gaius was at his ease in the smoking room, resplendent in a suit of champagne silk, in the Italian mode, with a rose-colored waistcoat. He was dosing himself with a mixture of port wine and brandy which he swore by as a sovereign remedy for dyspepsia. He gave me his hand.

"You look well, Gaius."

"My dear, if it were so! One pays for one's pleasures."

Gaius looked as he always did, of indeterminate age and identity. His skin was completely smooth, without wrinkle or blemish. His features were soft and malleable. Though he must have been close on fifty, his face had not been molded into a definite character. There was something husklike about it.

I knew some of Gaius's friends—a literary bishop, a young nobleman with a Guards commission, a retired admiral whose stories were as salty as ammonia. The talk was mostly of politics—of the progress of our war with France and the chances of a peace treaty, a subject that divided every parlor in London. Ordinary people had had enough of it. Wars are damnably expensive; each day brought reports of new taxes. The merchants and manufacturers wanted to return to business as normal. But Pitt, the greatest statesman called up by the war, had blood in his eye. He wanted to go on banging the frogs until they gave up Guadeloupe and Martinique as well as their North American possessions and hang the cost. However, Pitt's star was falling. Our new King George's Tory favorites, headed by his mother's Scottish lover, Lord Bute, had no enthusiasm for a war from which they could expect neither glory nor personal enrichment. Gaius's friends were generally in sympathy with the war-party, but mainly because they hated the Scots and sniffed at the favorite and his crowd as ignorant loblollies.

You might say that I had a personal interest in this war since one of my father's Smithstown relations, William Johnson, had gone out to the American colonies and made a great name for himself leading parties of Mohawk Indians against the French. Romantic legends had sprung up around Johnson. He was said to rule the Indians as a tribal king and to keep a seraglio of dusky beauties worthy of the Great Turk. But Sir William Johnson had done nothing for us, and my ambitions did not run to leaping about behind trees in smelly buckskin in places that fell into the blanks on our maps, and still less to marching up and down in a scarlet coat and a powdered wig to be potted like a woodcock by skulking savages.

So I paid only desultory attention to the clubmen's talk of grand strategy. Gaius made one remark that stuck in my mind. If it was not original, then at least it betrayed applied intelligence of no mean order; it might have served George III better than the collective wisdom of two generations of his ministers.

"The conditions for peace are obvious to me," said Gaius, "even if they are a mystery to the government. We ought to return Canada to King Louis. In exchange, we will take Martinique and Guadeloupe. What is a thousand miles of snow and ice compared to sugar? Let the frenchies keep their bears and wolves—on two legs or four—while we take the rum! We will promote trade while averting intestine conflicts. We need to retain the French in Canada to keep the colonists in their place. Remove the French—and their scalping parties—from North America and it will not be long before the damned colonists imagine they have no use for English soldiers or English government."

There were snickers of derision at the notion that colonial plowboys and raw frontiersmen could ever present a challenge to the most powerful empire on earth. But the admiral agreed that the American colonists were an insolent, unruly lot, not easily governed.

Gaius's attention was deflected by the arrival of a fashionably dressed man in dove-gray. His eyes were as sharp and quick as a magpie's, looking over a new-turned field.

"Ah, the sage of Strawberry Hill! Come, Shane, here is your chance to make an impression on our literary lion. You will forgive us, gentlemen. I owe some service to my protégé."

Gaius took my arm and whispered, "You know all about Horace Walpole. He is out of favor at court, but he knows almost as many people as I do, and his name is still a talisman with booksellers and editors. He'll get you published in the right places if he takes a liking to you."

Gaius gave Walpole a little bow.

"D'you know Mr Hardacre, my wife's lover?"

Walpole received this with aplomb; he was evidently used to Gaius's eccentricities.

"My compliments, sir," he said to me. "It is far too long since I had the pleasure of watching the divine Mrs Walsingham perform. Do I take it you are also connected with the theater?"

"I hope to be." I told Walpole I had had some modest success at Smock Alley with a farce about an Irishman who apes the manners of an English grandee. I did not think it necessary to tell him that the play's run ended with a riot on opening night.

“It is my observation that a novice writer begins with autobiography or pornography. With what he knows, or burns to know.” Walpole expressed sympathy that I had had no success in bringing my comedy to the London stage, despite Peg’s efforts on my behalf. “You must send me your play, if my amateur opinions would be of use to you.”

“I would be honored.”

“You’ll take a bottle with us, Horace.” Gaius had already hailed a waiter, and taken possession of a table with a view to the games room.

“I’m expecting a guest.”

“Then you’ll take two bottles. Do we know him?”

“Oh, I hardly think so.” For a moment, Walpole seemed quite embarrassed. “He’s only a boy,” his eye fell on me, “in a manner of speaking. It’s a deuced difficult business.”

Gaius put on his hungry look.

There was a great deal of noise coming from the games room. One of the men at the billiard table landed a pair of jennies, tipped back his head and let out a harsh whinnying laugh, *heynheynheyn*.

“*That man!*” Walpole moaned, and sat down on the chair Gaius had pulled out for him. The waiter came with a bottle of claret, and—perhaps to avoid further discussion of his guest—Walpole fell into the role of literary adviser, directing his whole conversation to me.

“Have you made the Tour, Mr Hardacre? No? Well of course, you’re young. An enviable vice. The only one that is abolished by time. I hesitate to say that you have not experienced enough to write, not if you are acquainted with Mrs Walsingham. But you must enlarge your observation to capture the fancy of this fickle town. You must make mankind your study. You must engross all the tempers and humors of our society.”

Crack! went the billiard balls.

Heynheynheyn came that screech of triumph.

Walpole wagged his plump little finger—the one with the signet—at the scene inside the games room.

“Consider my noble Lord Sandwich.” I identified the source of the whinnies in a long, ungainly figure flourishing a billiard cue. The features were bony and narrow. The bully-jaw flew out from above a high, tight stock.

“That head belongs on the stage,” said Walpole, in a stage whisper, “to give the mob a worthy target for a pippin! See how the earl twitches, now he has botched his cannon. He resembles a man who was hanged and cut down by mistake when the job was only half done.”

"Naughty, naughty," giggled Gaius.

"Saturnine! Do you hear me, Hardacre! The Earl of Sandwich is the very model of the humor. Sour and dogged even in the frenzy of his debaucheries. Ruins unripe girls—" he quivered with excitement, and dropped his voice even lower "—it was sheep at Eton. Don't expect an honest Irishman would know about that. Ask Gaius if you don't believe me."

"Oh I say, Horace. That's going a bit far."

"Sheep!" Walpole insisted. "Rams, for preference. It was a rite of passage for some of our sporting bullies. John Montagu, now—as he was before he got the title—he liked to have 'em hamstrung so they could not run away while he was beating them to death with a club. Ram-clubbing, we called it. Gaius, I believe you are blushing! You *do* remember!"

Gaius was not exactly blushing, but something strange had happened to his mouth. It was closed, forming a perfectly straight line. It had moved to one side of his nose and made a sharp angle like an errant exclamation mark. It might have been inked onto his pale, smooth skin.

"Study the early closely, Mr Hardacre! You won't see the like very often. Can you believe that the king, in his wisdom, has made him First Lord of the Admiralty? God preserve the Navy! Would you not agree that the earl has a fine, manly, sheep-biter's look about the gills?"

I gave Sandwich a closer look, and tried to picture him at the head of a howling tribe of young Etonians in pursuit of a sacrificial sheep. The earl swiveled his skull in our direction; it turned as stiffly as a toffee-apple on a stick.

"Oh Gawd," moaned Walpole.

The Earl of Sandwich had concluded his game and was advancing in our direction. He moved at a singular, wide-legged clip, as if he were stepping around the body of a dead sheep.

Gaius leaped up to meet him and mumbled something that brought a smile to the earl's thin lips.

"Your friend Mr Walsingham," Walpole remarked to me, as we watched this display, "has the courtier's gift, to be never in the way, but never out of it. He is always neutral, except in his own interest. You should watch your back with him. Sometimes life requires us to take a stand."

He rose without haste to greet the Earl of Sandwich.

"Demmed infernal buzz of wasps in here tonight, eh, Walpole?"

"I believe that only the female of that species has a stinger, my lord."

“I defer to your larger acquaintance with pests.”

“May I introduce Mr Hardacre?” Gaius intervened. “He has written a play for the Irish stage.”

The earl gave me a narrow look; it suggested that he considered neither comedy nor my native country a suitable topic for conversation.

“Another demmed scribbler, eh, Hardacre? You keep a weather eye on Mr Walpole. All sail and no ballast. Do I know your family?”

I mentioned my mother’s Dempster relations. This produced no sign of recognition.

Gaius surprised me by invoking the name of Sir William Johnson. As I have told you, the King’s Superintendent of Indians in North America was my father’s kinsman; after he knocked the frenchies on the head at Lake George and was made a baron-knight, my father posted a print of him in the library between a pair of deer-horns and a fox’s brush. I often looked at it as a boy. Billy Johnson was represented the way the London engraver thought a defender of empire ought to look—confident, well-fed, with a quantity of powdered hair that was not his own and a bright cuirass from a different time. I preferred the portrait of a younger Johnson that hung in the stone house at Smithstown. It presented a daredevil in a brocaded waistcoat of turquoise silk and a flared orange coat, whose full lips and dimpled chin betrayed sensuality without inhibition. It was a face that intrigued me. I felt that I might get along with the spark behind it. But in truth, I knew less about Sir William Johnson than about the Marquise de Pompadour and my father had barely mentioned his name since a falling-out with John Johnson, the slow, surly elder brother, who managed the Smithstown estate.

This did not deter Gaius.

“Mr Hardacre,” he announced, “is an intimate kinsman of Sir William Johnson who has contributed so greatly to licking the French in North America.”

This summoned a gleam of interest under the earl’s whitish-blond lashes.

“Johnson? Johnson? By gad, I’ve heard things about him! Likes dark meat, does he? Keeps a native harem? I’ve never tasted an Indian woman but, God’s pistols, I have had Turkey meat. What are Sir William’s sultanas like? Smoky, like gammon, what?”

“I am really no expert, my lord. I have not been to America.” The earl’s reference to Turkey meat left me somewhat fuddled. Gaius advised me later that Sandwich had cruised the eastern Mediterranean in his youth and had been much impressed by the

sexual delicacies available at the court of the Great Ottoman. The earl had founded a very selective club whose members dressed up in turbans and baggy silk pants.

“Sink me!” Sandwich goggled at me. “Can’t think what’s stopping you. War’s nearly over—great hulking brute like you—a useful connection and all that dark meat going spare, what? You Irish rub along well with natives. One savage tribe knows another, no? Too many Irish here for any man’s comfort. Go to the colonies! Go to the—what do Johnson’s darkies call themselves?”

“Mohawks,” I volunteered.

“Mohocks. Quite so. They’ll give you something to write about. Haw! Walpole wouldn’t know. He’s a hothouse plant—no games, no girls, no air, eh, Walpole? Just rattle and scribble, fribble and fleer. *Heyn!*”

“If the thought of exercise overcomes me,” said Walpole, “I generally lie down until it passes. You’ll forgive me, gentlemen. There is someone I have to meet. Your servant, my lord.”

The earl sat down in Walpole’s seat, and insisted on addressing me as an authority on the natives of North America. He was keenly interested in native methods of scalping and torture. His breathing quickened and his facial tic worked harder as I endeavored to slake his curiosity with a mishmash of wild stories that I drew from the adventure yarns of my boyhood and an article I had seen in the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. I was as much astonished by the earl’s ignorance as his prurience. True, he had been restored only lately to the penetralia of our government. Yet it seemed to me that Sandwich must have seen something from Johnson’s Indian Department and listened to soldiers’ club talk about the exquisite butchery of British regulars by Montcalm’s savages. I soon realized that this elderly rake was as excited by repetition as by novelty, and that bare-bum flogging and ram-clubbing at the most famous of England’s public schools send forth curious men to rule the Empire.

When I invented a particularly lurid tale about naked squaws chewing bits off a missionary, his lordship whinnied and slapped his thigh.

“We must tell that one to Abbot Francis!” he exclaimed mysteriously.

“Capital, capital!” Gaius beamed at me when the earl left us for a few moments to relieve himself. “Keep it up, and he’ll give you a place at the Admiralty.”

“What would I do at the Admiralty? I don’t know one end of a boat from the other.”