



BOXER BEETLE

A Novel

NED BEAUMAN

B L O O M S B U R Y
NEW YORK • BERLIN • LONDON • SYDNEY

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Praise from the UK for *Boxer, Beetle*

Imprint

... we are all accustomed to believe that maps and reality are necessarily related, or that if they are not, we can make them so by altering reality.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Dissonance is the truth about harmony.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In idle moments I sometimes like to close my eyes and imagine Joseph Goebbels' forty-third birthday party. I like to think that even in the busy autumn of 1940, Hitler might have found time to organise a surprise party for his close friend – pretending for weeks that the date had slipped his mind – deliberately ignoring the Propaganda Minister's increasingly sulky and awkward hints, and waiting until the very last order had been despatched to his U-boat commanders on the evening of Tuesday, 2 October before he led Goebbels on some pretext into the cocktail lounge of the Reich Chancellery. A great shout of '*Alles Gute zum Geburtstag!*', a cascade of streamers, some relieved and perhaps even slightly tearful laughter from Goebbels himself as he embraced the Führer, and the party could begin.

All this is conjecture, of course. But what is certain is that at some point on that day Hitler presented Goebbels with his birthday present: an exquisite fifteen-volume illustrated edition of the complete works of Goethe, published in Stuttgart in 1881 by J. G. Gottafchen, bound in red Moroccan leather with a gilded spine and marbled edges.

One can't help feeling sorry for the soldiers of the 101st US Airborne Division who, nearly five years later, broke into a boarded-up salt mine near Berchtesgaden and splintered the schnapps crates piled inside to find not gold bullion, nor the Holy Spear of Destiny that pierced Christ's side, nor even a single consolatory bottle of schnapps, but instead Goebbels' personal library, stashed there in haste when the war began to turn against the Nazis. None the less, somebody was dutiful enough to make sure the books escaped the bonfires, and they were shipped back to the Library of Congress in Washington. (Meanwhile, the vast majority of Hitler's sixteen thousand books, along with his skullcap and Eva Braun's underwear, were captured by the Red Army and to this day lie mouldering in an abandoned baroque church on the Uzkoe estate near Moscow, which I can only assume is, by some distance, the spookiest building in the entire world.)

The book collection wouldn't even be unpacked until 1952, when the job was given to a college student on work experience who probably wished he was helping out at a summer camp. By then the Gottafchen Goethe, with its fond inscription by Hitler and scattered marginalia by Goebbels, had escaped on to the open market. And some fifty years later it passed into the hands of Horace Grublock, the London property developer who until his violent death earlier this year was an irregular employer of mine.

Between 2002 and 2007 Grublock gave me three volumes (from *Prometheus* through to *Iphigenia auf Tauris*) in exchange for errands, promising that one day, if I were loyal, I would collect the whole set. It was humiliating, but Grublock said he'd never sell – and even if he did, the sort of dealers who could handle the Goebbels Gottafchen Goethe wouldn't have taken so much as a telephone call from the likes of me, Kevin Broom – and even if they would, I could never have afforded it – so I had no choice. That's why, one day in September, when Grublock called at ten o'clock on a Thursday night back when I'd never even heard of the town of Roachmorton, I ran for my phone with toothpaste still dribbling from my mouth, knowing it had to be him.

'Fishy,' he said.

'Yes, Horace?'

'You remember that private investigator who's been doing a spot of work for me? Zroszak?'

'I think so.'

'He's supposed to check in every evening by telephone. But he's missed two nights now, without any warning. I've tried to call him myself and there's no answer. Drive over and see if he's all right.'

'To his office?'

‘He doesn’t have an office. He works out of his home, like a suburban palm-reader. It’s in Camden. It’ll only take you ten minutes.’ He gave me the address.

‘What’s he doing for you?’

‘You know perfectly well I can’t tell you, Fishy. As contingently loyal as you may be to me, know your real allegiance is to your internet friends. Unless by any chance you’ve heard of a fellow called Seth Roach?’

‘I hadn’t.’

‘That’s that, then. Off you go.’

I am often asked the question, ‘Why would you become a collector of rare Nazi memorabilia unless you are yourself a secret Nazi?’ Or, anyway, I expect I would often be asked that question, if anyone knew about my hobby beyond Grublock, my former cleaning lady Maria, and (as Grublock calls them) my ‘internet friends’.

I’m not a secret Nazi. I feel sick when I think about what they did. So do you, probably. And if just the thought can provoke a spurious little shiver of survivor’s guilt, imagine what it’s like to pick up an SS dagger in your hand. I don’t know of any experience like it: you feel as if you’re doing something terribly wrong, and yet you know it can’t be wrong because you’re doing no harm to anyone. It’s stupid and exhilarating and revelatory. Normally you can’t get a proper look at your own conscience because it only ever comes out to gash you with its beak and you just want to do whatever you can to push it away; but put your conscience in the cage of this paradox, where it can slither around the bark but it can’t hurt you, and you can study it for as long as you wish. Most people don’t truly know how they feel about the Holocaust because they’re worried that if they think about it too hard they’ll find out they don’t feel sad enough about the 6 million dead, but I’m an expert in my own soul.

I should also add that prices for Nazi memorabilia can go up 10 or 20 per cent a year. Try getting a return like that on the stock market. I trade on internet auction sites, exploiting the stupidity and laziness of dabblers who don’t realise or don’t care that they could get a better price from a real dealer. Like all capitalists, I treat the free market like a rich old grandmother, insisting I adore the bitch, calling her sprightly, but more than happy to exploit her lethargy and dementia for profit. If she tries to grope my business interests with her Invisible Hand I just give her a slap. In my day jobs I specialise in the Allied forces from the Second World War, but I also do the Crimea, the Great War and Vietnam, plus the occasional Japanese samurai sword. (I would never buy or sell any Nazi stuff merely for profit.) I used to work in accounting, but I hated taking instructions from clients, and more importantly I thought it would be convenient if my employment were coextensional with my vocation – this way I can justify the hours I spend at my computer scouring catalogues and auction listings and messageboards. And that pays my rent, but I never have the liquidity to make any really big deals, and often I have to save for months just to afford, say, one of Ilsa Koch’s cigarette cases.

So, among collectors, I am a worm – and particularly so in comparison to Stuart, my best friend who rivals even Grublock. Every once in a while a week will go by when I’m too angry to speak to Stuart because he has refused to bid for some irresistible treasure, letting it fly away to Tokyo, never to be seen again. He could afford almost anything: the only child of a hedge fund maestro, he supplemented his inheritance with a considerable legal settlement after an accident with an office coffee machine left him paralysed from the waist down. I often wonder whether I’d give up the use of my own legs in exchange for, say, the gold fountain pen with which Adolf Hitler and Rudolf Hess wrote *Mein Kampf*, and I’m fairly sure that I would. It’s not as if I leave the house very often, and Stuart always seems perfectly cheerful despite his disability (adding weight to my persistent suspicion that his paid carer will take extra for giving him hand jobs). Conversely, I also often wonder whether I’d give up such a prize in exchange for a cure for my trimethylaminuria; and, to tell the

truth, as much as I hate my trimethylaminuria, I think I'd be willing not only to live with the disease but to inflict it on Stuart too, if I could get my hands on that pen.

I mention all this only so that you can understand that I am not like Grublock. Not like him at all. Once, I heard my former employer explain his vast collection to an investor from Russia. 'In a sense I suppose, I am a Nazi,' he said thoughtfully. 'I admire their ambition. Their courage. Their style, in the Nietzschean sense. They allowed no exceptions to their vision, and that is a lesson we should all learn. And of course I love the architecture, although sadly most of it only exists as blueprints.'

'But you also hate Jews?' said the Russian.

'Certainly not. As I said, I have great respect for certain aspects of Nazism, but not for their odd embarrassing phobias. All that is irrational, and I'm no irrationalist. You can easily tell the collector with those leanings. They have the books purportedly bound in human skin and the bars of soap purportedly made from human fat. Idiiotic. It's almost impossible to tell tanned human skin from tanned pig skin, and the soap myth is simply that. But they so want it to be true that they will waste their money anyway. That is, if they're not deniers – in that case, you'll find none of the nasty stuff but probably some contemporaneous documentary "evidence" proving that Dachau was just a large experimental vegetable garden, or some such rot.' He drained his gin and tonic. 'No, I certainly don't hate Jews. I feel sorry for the Nazis' victims, in as much as it's possible to feel sorry for a mass of proletarian foreigners who died decades before one was born. And I admit that Hitler was probably mad, or evil, or an utter bastard, in as much as there is any difference between the three, and in as much as it makes any more sense to apply those words to a dead dictator than to apply them to a natural earthquake or a hurricane. And I think it was wrong to try to take over Europe, in as much as any one man's chosen political aims can be any more or less legitimate than any other's.'

The absurd thing, by the way, about Grublock's collection, which occupied the upper floor of his triplex penthouse, was that it outdid the Nazis themselves: never in the history of the Deutsches Reich would half so much finery have been gathered together in one room. It was more as if some Las Vegas entrepreneurs had started a casino in the eighties called Hitler's Palace. The centrepiece of the simulacrum was a glass case containing the Luftwaffe uniform of General Walter von Axhelm, including his Knight's Cross and his emerald-encrusted ornamental hunting dagger with a blade that belonged originally to Napoleon. Beside it was Grublock's most valuable treasure, a gorgeous porcelain falconry chest made for Hermann Goering. The rest of the room was crammed with more uniforms, medals, weapons, torture devices, ornaments and paintings, all lit by small dim spotlights. The walls were draped with long red silk banners with black swastikas on white circles. It was a wonderland. So when Grublock wouldn't even give me a hint of what Zroszak was doing for him, I could be sure that the detective was on the trail of something truly extraordinary.

I changed back out of my pyjamas and went downstairs to the car. Happy Fried Chicken, over which I live, was full of drunkards as usual – its popularity used to baffle me until I found out one of the cooks sells cannabis. It was a cold night, and as I drove over to a block of flats near the canal, London felt like a whispered conversation between street lights. I wanted to listen to the radio (there was a pirate station I like called Myth FM) but I could find nothing on my crippled car system but shreds of white noise. The London air must be heavy with static, I always think, the electromagnetism rising from cars and microwave ovens and telephone wires – another thin dead residue of the city, like rubbish and dust and soot – I have no doubt the rats and pigeons and cockroaches have learned to navigate by it.

When I got to Zroszak's flat I buzzed his intercom but no one answered, so I waited in the cold until a girl in a grey dress came out and I grabbed the outer door as it swung shut behind her. She wrinkled her nose as she went past. Upstairs, the door of 3B was slightly ajar. The lock was broken.

knocked, but again there was no answer, so I said ‘Mr Zroszak?’ and pushed the door open.

Inside the small, sparse flat I saw Zroszak kneeling behind a desk as if he were praying, with his head slumped forward so that his face was hidden. There was dried blood on the edge of the desk and a dark stain where it had dripped on to the carpet. As I moved closer I could see the greenish black veins bulging on his forehead, and smell the rot already coming on like an old dull blade being slowly sharpened. All this was quite familiar from the many television dramas I watch about glamorous forensic investigators – the ones which almost make one want to be murdered just to have such a sexy woman hold your lungs in her soft hands, the ones where they primp the crime scene like an ageing film actress, with powders and tweezers and respectful murmurs – but I wasn’t a detective and I just wanted to turn around and run away.

Shaking, I dialled Grublock.

‘Fishy.’

‘He’s dead,’ I said.

‘Oh, fucking hell. How?’

‘Shot, I think. With a gun.’

‘Fucking hell. Bloody Japanese, I bet. One of those awful little consortiums. They get up to vulgar nonsense like this all the time. Well, thank you, Fishy. Go home. I’ll send someone over who knows what they’re doing.’

I hung up. Looking around, I realised that the place had been ransacked. The drawers of Zroszak’s filing cabinet were open but empty, and there were no books on any of the shelves. On the desk, next to the murdered man’s head, were a sketchpad, a pencil, a rubber and a book called *How to Draw Dogs and Cats*. Apart from that, if there had ever been even the slightest trace of Zroszak’s personality in his comfortless flat, it was missing now, like the moral of a story forgetfully told.

If I could find out anything important, I thought, Grublock would probably buy me a Panzer tank for Christmas. But even if Zroszak’s killer or killers had missed anything, there was no way I could search for clues with Zroszak’s body there. Just the thought had me running to the tiny kitchen for an ice cube to suck on – my late mother’s trusted remedy for anxiety.

The light in Zroszak’s freezer was broken, and the ice tray was stuck to the bottom surface. I pulled on it hard, and it came away with a little cough of frost. As it did so, something dropped to the tiled floor.

I bent down and picked it up. It was a sealed foil packet, like an astronaut might have for his tomato soup. I cut it open with my Swiss Army knife. Inside was a yellowed sheet of paper, folded in quarters. I smoothed it out on the kitchen table and glanced over the typewritten text. The letter was headed with the address of the Führerbau on Arcisstrasse in Munich, dated 4 October, 1936, and directed to somebody called Philip Erskine at a street in Clerkenwell. When I saw the signature of the sender, I scrabbled desperately for an ice cube.

Dear Doctor Erskine,

I have received gifts from popes, tycoons, and heads of state, but none have ever been so singular or unexpected as your kind tribute. It is a reminder that the conquests of the scientist are every bit as important to our future as the conquests of the soldier. I hope you will keep me informed of the progress of your work – perhaps one day the Third Reich will have a position for you. How is your German?

Fond regards,

Adolf Hitler

I spent the next half hour searching every inch of Zroszak's flat. His body didn't matter any more. But I found nothing.

Pock wasn't just losing to Sinner – he was being skinned, diced, erased. It seemed to Pock that the hairless runt could see inside him – could see Pock's memory of his first kiss, or his trick of wiggling his ears in time to a song, or his hatred of cats – could see it, take careful aim, and knock it out of his head like a loose tooth. Soon there would be nothing left of Pock but meat. Never had he felt punches so precise and impatient and cruel. And the other boy was impossibly clean – not a speck of blood on him – and although his bony chest did shine with sweat under the lights, it was a thin, efficient cooling sweat, not the sour chicken soup that gushed into Pock's eyes and dripped from his chin and gathered in his shorts to make his cock feel heavier than his fists.

Premierland had once been a warehouse for Fairclough's, the butcher's, and if Pock felt like meat then so did many of the thousand people watching him, who were not just packed in together like meat but smoked like meat too, squinting through a blue cigarette fog so dense you could hardly see the steel girders that held up the roof. And if this tiny demon Yid hadn't decided to give the sell-out crowd a show then Pock wouldn't have lasted a round, he knew that. But Pock had never, ever been knocked out in the ring, and it wasn't going to happen tonight, with his husky-squeaky Myrna down there watching – he could never fuck her again if she saw him helpless on his back, fucked. So when the bell rang and Pock staggered back to his corner he didn't listen to his trainer's yammering, didn't take a gulp of water, didn't even knock his left fist on his right boot like he usually did for luck, he just swore under his breath and stared across the ring at Sinner, who stared back from his stoic expressionless, one arm draped over the ropes, as Max Frink, Sinner's trainer and manager, splashed him with ice water. Then the bell rang again, and Sinner spat twice and jumped up and skipped forward, already moving (as the young reporter from *Boxing* would put it) 'like a dozen kind admirers were trying to present him with a garland of poison ivy'. Pock was trudging along with his heels down on the canvas, while Sinner was still bouncing up almost on his toes. They circled each other, and Pock made a few tired jabs that he knew Sinner would dodge, then got a hard right hook to his kidney in return – he'd dribble blood in his sleep tonight, wake up with stained underwear like a girl who had fainted, blocked, fainted, and finally reached way down to thump Sinner in the balls.

(This, anyway, is how I'm almost sure it must have happened.)

Even Frink, veteran of a hundred Spitalfields street brawls, winced and clenched his teeth then, but Sinner, who'd actually taken the punch, merely grunted. Rage did come to his eyes, but that was nothing to do with pain: Sinner and pain were long estranged. Instead, Frink thought to himself, it was Sinner's realisation that he might be about to be cheated out of his knock-out. As the crowd jeered and delighted with this bit of slapstick, Frink looked down at the referee (who in those days stood outside the ring, surrounded by a mob of gamblers determined to make his decisions for him), hoping Mottle would have that brittle squint of a referee who knows he's missed something important but is too stubborn to admit his error – two times out of three you could stick a thumb in the other man's eye and not get caught – but to Frink's dismay Mottle was barking, 'Foul! Foul!'

'Nah, piss off,' said Sinner. 'That weren't a foul. It didn't hurt. Fight's still on.'

'Below the belt,' insisted Mottle. There was already a scuffle starting among the gamblers behind him. Pock flung his hands in the air and shook his head as if to protest his innocence.

'It didn't even hurt,' said Sinner, glaring down at Mottle. 'Prick couldn't hurt me. Put a cobblestone in his glove and he couldn't hurt me.'

'We won't have any cheating here.' Mottle looked over to the judges' table for confirmation.

‘I want to fucking fight. They all want me to fight.’ Sinner turned to shout at his trainer. ‘Frink, tell him! This is a piss-take!’

‘You’ve won, son. Rules is rules.’

‘Bollocks to this.’

Mottle nodded to the announcer. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Seth “Sinner” Roach!’ There was a sarcastic, resentful cheer from a few of the crowd, and then they went back to hooting and booin’ even louder now, no longer in mockery but in anger. They’d been cheated, just like Sinner, and before long an itchy discordant drone would start to rise up to the ceiling of Premierland, a threat you didn’t hear with your ears but with your stomach and fists. Tonight there would be knives out all the way down Commercial Road, Pock thought, not just the gamblers but everyone who’d lost out on what they’d paid for. It didn’t matter how good the first three fights were if someone spoiled the fourth, even worse than when you let a girl change her mind before you finished with her. He began to wonder if he’d made a mistake, but then he spotted Myrna in the third row, putting on lipstick with a compact mirror. He’d tell her that he’d been winning, that he’d been unlucky. Barnaby Pock, still technically unbeaten after nineteen matches, he thought. His head hurt.

‘Hold on, hold on,’ said Frink, hurrying over to where Mottle stood, pulling along with him a gangly fellow with a moustache who tonight was Premierland’s house physician (a moderate improvement over the days when the best you could hope for was a sticking plaster in the pocket of the referee). ‘Let the doctor look at him. If the doctor says he’s all right, then you have to let him fight.’

‘I do not,’ said Mottle.

‘He wants to fight.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t possibly conduct a proper examination out here,’ said the doctor.

‘Have a feel!’ shouted one of the gamblers.

‘Are you wearing any sort of protective apparatus, Mr Roach?’ said the doctor.

‘He wears a strap,’ said Frink.

‘Only a strap! Perhaps you or your trainer are acquainted with my own line of Fistic Armatures. No? Because I assure you, gentlemen, if all pugilists were to be supplied with this inexpensive invention, there would be no question of halting a match simply because a blow had gone astray. They are impregnable.’

‘Just have a look at the boy,’ said Frink.

‘It won’t make any difference, Mel,’ said Mottle.

‘Quite comfortable, too,’ said the doctor. ‘Mr Roach, I dare say you would take a – my goodness well, I dare say a size ten. And you, Mr Pock ... I estimate a size four. Or perhaps a three.’

‘Do you want a fucking knock?’ said Pock.

‘That is a very felicitous offer, sir, since I happen to be wearing one of my Fistic Armatures at this very moment. In fact, I challenge any one of you gentlemen to strike me in that region. Like Stephen, I shall feel no pain.’

‘I want to fight,’ said Sinner in a voice like steel handcuffs. ‘They’re waiting. They didn’t come to see a fucking pantomime.’

‘Anyone?’ said the doctor.

‘Come on, mate, you’ve won,’ said Pock.

‘Surely you will be good enough to test out my invention, sir?’ the doctor said, gesturing to the boy from *Boxing*, who had pushed his way through the gamblers with his notebook held over his head like a lantern.

Frink studied Sinner's face, hoping the boy's rage might scuttle back into the gloom behind his eyes. But Sinner was still angry – he hadn't given up yet.

'Do you think Mr Roach was winning, Mr Pock?' stuttered the reporter.

'I beseech you,' said the doctor.

'Come on, now, Seth,' said Frink. 'Next time.'

'What do you say, Mr Roach?' said the reporter.

'Let's all go home,' said Pock.

'Will no man here assault my testicles?' shouted the doctor. And that was when Sinner turned and smacked Pock in the face so hard that he tumbled backwards over the ropes and crashed into the gamblers like a bad idea into a hungry nation.

Frink had never seen such a punch, or heard such a cheer. As the boy from *Boxing* wiped a spray of blood from his glasses and his notebook, the crowd squealed and cackled and howled Sinner's name like a lover's, smashing beer bottles and flinging their hats in the air.

'You ought to be locked up!' said Mottle to Sinner, hardly able to make himself heard. He turned to Frink. 'Are you going to let him walk out of here after that?' Frink shrugged, and handed Sinner his robe as he climbed down from the ring. The doctor was trying to persuade some of the gamblers to help him carry Pock outside.

'Mr Roach, did he get what was coming to him?' said the reporter.

'We all get what's coming to us, son,' said Frink.

Dozens of men and women and children got up from their seats as Sinner pushed through toward the corridor that led to the dressing rooms, hoping to shake his hand or kiss his cheek or pat his back or pass him a cigar, but he just looked straight ahead, swearing under his breath. Although he would never have admitted it, even to himself, he liked having fans, and he really liked ignoring his fans, and he'd learnt that ignoring them just made them even more loyal, especially the women. Tonight most of them were content to pay tribute to Frink instead. The only concession Sinner made was to put his fists up quickly for a photographer.

'You could have done him afterwards, Seth, if you had to do that,' muttered Frink.

'He hit me in the eggs.'

'Yeah, but you said it didn't hurt.'

No one remembered how a huge green leather armchair had found its way into the biggest of Premierland's dressing rooms, but by now it stank of sweat and resin and was vomiting stuffing from its cracks. Sinner sat down and picked up a bottle of gin. 'You can fuck off, I think, if you're going to moan like you always do.'

'You know I am,' said Frink. He tried to remember a time when the boy wouldn't have talked to his trainer like that. He could, but only if he remembered so selectively that it became a sort of fantasy. For a while, he'd worried that Sinner's growing local celebrity might make him harder to control, but in fact Sinner seemed to be almost immune to fame. Not, of course, because of any innate humility – exactly the opposite. The boy had an arrogance so unshakeable that any outside stimulation was basically redundant, a kick up the arse of a speeding train. If Sinner slipped further out of his grasp it wouldn't be because of fame, but because of a much more banal intoxicant. 'I need to talk to Pock's man anyway,' Frink added as he bent down to tidy away a skipping rope. His forehead and eyelids and the tip of his nose were always very pink, as if he'd once fallen asleep on a stove.

'Why?'

'He might try and get you banned.'

'I won't get banned.'

‘No, not this time, and not next time, but the time after that you might.’

‘Bye, then.’

‘Don’t finish that too fast.’

Frink went out. Seth sucked on the bottle of gin and then coughed and closed his eyes.

Sixteen years old; seven professional matches (unbeaten); nine toes; four foot, eleven inches tall. These were the numbers that made Seth ‘Sinner’ Roach, all of them pretty low, but what did that matter? Today – 18 August 1934 – he was already the best new boxer in London. To his opponents a fight with Sinner was like an interrogation, every punch a question they could not possibly answer, and every accusation they could not possibly deny.

His nickname, like the armchair, was of mysterious origin. ‘Jews don’t have sinners, Seth,’ Rabbi Brasch used to say, ‘we just have idiots.’ When Sinner was sober, there was an intensity to his expression so fixed that, if you gazed at it for too long (which a lot of people did, trying to understand how such a stunted, thuggish physique could be so beautiful), it began to seem not intense but, on the contrary, blank and inert, as when you repeat a harsh word too many times and it loses its meaning, and this changeless quality seemed to deny even the possibility of sin. But everyone called him Sinner, none the less. He had oily black hair and thin eyebrows and long eyelashes and small nipples and slightly protruding ears and still, improbably, a full set of teeth.

There was a quiet knock at the door. ‘Fuck off,’ said Sinner. But the door opened, and into the dressing room stepped a tall blond man in a black overcoat. ‘Mr Roach,’ he said, extending a hand. He wore calfskin gloves with pearl buttons and had a neat moustache that did not make up for a weak chin. He carried himself as if he thought he might at any moment have to dive out of the way of a galloping horse.

‘My name is Philip Erskine,’ he said.

‘Enchanted,’ replied Sinner, without moving.

‘I very much enjoyed your performance tonight.’

‘Brought me some flowers, have you?’

‘I’m sorry to intrude like this, Mr Roach, but I didn’t know otherwise when I might have a chance to speak to you.’ While Sinner’s accent was east London with just a trace of his parents’ Yiddish, Erskine’s was the poshest Sinner had ever heard, with the exception of Danny Gaster’s manager, who was supposedly a disinherited aristocrat – and announcers on the wireless. Seeing he wasn’t going to get a handshake, Erskine withdrew his hand in a way that seemed intended to give the impression he had never really wanted one in the first place. ‘I’d like to make you an offer.’

‘Pretty sister you’d like me to meet?’

‘Actually, I—’

‘Oh, no, should have known. I’m looking at a hardened gangster. You want me to throw a fight.’

‘No, it’s—’

‘I get it,’ said Sinner, taking a swig of gin. ‘You’re going to be a heavyweight. Need me to find you a good trainer.’

‘In fact I know nothing about boxing, Mr Roach. I am a scientist.’

‘How fascinating,’ said Sinner.

‘May I explain?’ The boy did not immediately respond, so Erskine continued: ‘It’s very kind of you to hear me out. I’ll be extremely brief. For the last four years I’ve been busy with the study of insects. There is very little I don’t know about beetles. But I’ve had enough of beetles now. I want to study human beings. And you are the human being I have most wished to study, ever since I first learnt of your very unusual physiology.’

‘You mean I’m a short-arse?’

‘Yet by all accounts a combatant of remarkable strength and skill. And your father, they say, is equally diminutive, and his father before him?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And only nine toes, if I’m not mistaken?’

‘What’s your “offer”?’

‘May I sit down?’

‘No.’

‘Mr Roach, I would like to give you fifty pounds in exchange for permission to conduct a thorough medical examination and interview every month for a period of five or six months. After that, you would never have to see me again, and you would be kept anonymous in any resultant literature.’

‘Fifty quid to prod me like one of your earwigs?’

‘I can assure you that the examinations would not be unpleasant.’

‘What the fuck is this?’ said Sinner, raising his voice for the first time. ‘You think I need your fucking fifty quid? I’m going to be flyweight champion of the world. I’m not on the fucking dole.’

‘A hundred pounds, then.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Two hundred. Mr Roach, you do not realise how perfectly you. ... No one can take your place, sir. Wouldn’t you like to accompany your sporting triumph with a scientific one? I hope that my humble work will make at least some tiny contribution to a project which will, without a doubt, be of wonderful lasting benefit to our whole race. The finest minds of Europe and the United States are coming together to—’

‘What are you going on about?’

‘Eugenics, Mr Roach. Have you heard of it?’

‘Is this cunt boring you, Seth? Pardon me, I mean “this gentleman”.’ Kölmel chuckled. He stood in the doorway holding a cigar. Like Frink, Kölmel was stocky and flat-nosed, but fatter and balder than his cousin. ‘That was a hint, mate,’ he added.

‘Is there any chance you might reconsider?’ said Erskine quietly to Sinner.

‘Fuck off back to your beetles.’

‘Very well. None the less, I shall leave my card on the table, in case you should have a change of heart. Goodbye, gentlemen,’ said Erskine, and went out.

‘Why are you wearing a fucking overcoat on a day like this?’ Kölmel shouted after him, but there was no reply. Kölmel turned back to Sinner. ‘Who was that?’

‘Some fucking bum-boy toff.’

‘What did he want?’

‘Put me in a freak show.’

‘You should have someone on the door here, Sinner.’

Sinner shrugged.

‘Anyway, came to give my congratulations.’

‘You taking the piss?’

‘You were murdering him, son. You could see his knees tremble. That’s what counts. Pock joking about at the end like that, that don’t come into it. You know Joe Schmeling actually won a title claiming a foul? They say his trainer had a cup with a big dent in it, kept it in his pocket every day just in case. Came good that time – slipped it in the cunt’s shorts like a conjurer.’

Sinner was seven years old when he first met Albert Kölmel, helping his father pack up the vegetable stall on a Saturday night in February. Until 1927 Kölmel still made his rounds personally, but even back then he behaved as if Spitalfields Market was his alone, strolling around like a factory owner inspecting his machines. One hand held a cigar and the other was permanently clenched into a fist, and the young Sinner was thrilled to think that Kölmel was always so close to knocking someone's lights out that it wasn't even worth uncurling his fingers. Only later did he realise that inside the fist was hidden, implied, Kölmel's weapon of choice: a razor blade stuck into a wine cork about an eighth of an inch of steel protruding, a sharp tongue, enough to scar a man's face but not enough to kill him. A man like Kölmel would be an idiot to carry a knife or a gun or anything else that could get you caught and hanged if something went wrong – better, if you really had to punish a man, to hold him down and cut deep into his upper lip, so that later, when the scar tissue formed and pulled the lip upward, his mouth would be permanently twisted open. Or there were other pranks without the blade. Once Bryan Harding had tried to make Kölmel pay full price for his portion of fish and chips, so Kölmel picked up Harding's cat and threw her into his deep fat fryer.

'This your boy?' Kölmel had said on that February evening.

'Here,' said Sinner's father, passing Kölmel five shillings without meeting his eye.

'What's your name, son?' Kölmel said to Sinner, who was sorting mouldy turnips from good ones. Around them were the scavengers: first the very poor, the very mean and the very old, who would wait until the end of the day to get the unwanted produce for the lowest prices, and then the homeless, the crippled and the mad, who would scurry along to gather up the detritus on the ground, looking for squashed fruit and vegetables, cardboard for bedding, and bits of broken wooden boxes that would help to make a fire. To Sinner, a market like this was just a ceaseless battle against decay, a mere waiting room for the huge rubbish dump on Back Church Lane: squint for long enough against the high wind of putrefaction, and surely before long it would begin to blow years from your own life, so you'd start to smell rotten yourself; better to work in a chemist's or a sweet shop, where the shiny pellets in the glass jars could be nine centuries old for all anyone knew. At the same time, there was something lovely about the market in the early mornings, when he was rarely here: everything ablaze with freshness but nobody much around, like the beginning of creation. Except that, at the beginning of creation, God had not yet even conceived of a creature like Albert Minyo, who could shout nothing but 'Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys! Saveloys!' eight hours a day for thirty years.

'My name's Seth,' Sinner had replied.

'You got any brothers and sisters?'

'Anna's my little sister.'

'I'd like to meet her. Well, see you again, Seth. Much obliged, Mr Roach,' said Kölmel, patting him on the shoulder.

After Kölmel had gone, Sinner knew from his father's expression not to ask who the man was or why he was taking money; but a few weeks later, when Alfeo turned up on a Sunday with plasters on both sides of his face, Sinner felt almost sure it had something to do with Kölmel. (Sinner didn't know that, if you had asked Kölmel, he would cheerfully have assured you of his purposes: the money would help to prevent dirty new immigrants from setting up in the market to compete with the established stall-holders.) Either way, he couldn't help seeing Kölmel as a benevolent figure, particularly since Alfeo loved to give Sinner a hard cuff over the head whenever he went near Alfeo's cakes. And he didn't mind seeing his father get humiliated. Intimidation was a kind of conquest, and Sinner liked conquest.

By the time Sinner was nine, he was working for Kölmel at the wet docks. Clutching a rinsed-out

petrol can and a 'rum pipe' (a few inches of metal pipe glued to a foot of rubber tubing), he and another Whitechapel boy would creep down to the creaking wooden platforms where barrels of rum for export were being unloaded. There, with the other boy on lookout, he would 'suck the monkey': jam the metal end of the rum pipe under the barrel's stopper, suck on the rubber end until liquid began to flow, fill the can, replace the lid, and wait while the other boy filled his own can; then they'd run off snatching a lime or a banana or even a pineapple from a crate on the way, dockers spitting curses as they passed – slow down after a couple of minutes to walk panting and giggling through Limehouse and swap their cans with one of Kölmel's men for a few pence when they got home. That was how Sinner got his first taste of anything stronger than the froth on his father's ale. It made you grimace but if you drank enough it felt like discovering an entire hidden room in your own house that you'd never even known about. You wanted to do more than poke your head through the doorway. You wanted to take its dimensions.

When he needed someone beaten up, Kölmel didn't use anyone younger than fifteen or sixteen because they weren't strong enough and they got scared off too easily – and by the time Sinner was twelve, and everyone could see that he was already the strongest boy on his street and that he wasn't scared of anything, Frink had made his claim on him. But Kölmel had won such a fortune betting on Sinner's first few Premierland matches, back when no one but his cousin had guessed quite how good this midget newcomer was, that he still saw Sinner almost as an employee, and was officially 'taking an interest' in the boy's career. That meant his men wouldn't extort any more money from Sinner's father, even though Sinner told them they were welcome to. Kölmel really only ran his old protection racket for sentimental reasons, anyway – from what Sinner had heard, a hundred times more money now came from whores and marijuana and forged cheques than could possibly be monkey-sucked with a razor threat from the stale loaves and squishy apples and gnarled pigs' feet of the failing Spitalfields Market.

'What's next for you, then?' said Kölmel in the dressing room. Here they were, today, with Sinner slumped in his green throne and Kölmel standing there like a supplicant; it didn't reflect how things really were, but it still gave Sinner pleasure.

'I want to go to America,' Sinner said. 'New York City.'

'I mean your next fight.'

'Don't know. Ask Frink.'

'What do you want to go to America for?'

'Proper money over there. And you get treated like royalty, they say.'

'Tossers, Americans. Except my half-brother.'

Sinner shrugged again. He thought of his father, whose journey from a village in eastern Poland had ended at the Jewish shelter on Leman Street only because he'd been thrown off the ship that was going to take him to the United States.

'You're talkative tonight, ain't you?' said Kölmel. 'Got a girl waiting?' He was ugly when he smiled. 'Course you do. Give her a good hard one from me, son.' Kölmel didn't know what Frink knew.

After Kölmel left, Sinner drank a little more gin, got dressed, and then telephoned for a cab to take him from Bethnal Green to Covent Garden.

AFTER THE DAY'S ROUTINE SPEND YOUR EVENING AT
The Caravan
81 ENDELL ST.
(Corner of Shaftesbury Avenue, facing Princes Theatre)

London's Greatest Bohemian Rendezvous
said to be the most unconventional spot in town
ALL NIGHT GAIETY Dancing to Charlie

PERIODICAL NIGHT TRIPS TO THE GREAT
OPEN SPACES, INCLUDING THE ACE OF SPADES, ETC.

The West End was littered now with these little cards, but Sinner had heard about the Caravan opening straight from its founder, Will Reynolds, a gambler, boxing enthusiast and well-known Soho rake who had been determined to make the worst possible use of a £300 inheritance from his Presbyterian great-aunt. The basement club was decorated in a nonspecific oriental style, with lacquered furniture, red hanging lanterns and painted silk drapes. Tonight, as every night, it was teeming. The band played 'When I Take My Morning Promenade'. Later there would be a drag show.

Sinner liked coming here straight from a fight without bothering to wash. All the other men were so soaped, even perfumed, but he just stank, and in the crush at the bar they couldn't ignore it. It was like walking around with his cock out. A few people greeted him, but he was already sick of talking tonight so he bought a double gin and stood at the end of the bar scanning faces. After a minute or two he noticed a good-looking boy of nineteen or twenty, with a French sort of bent nose, standing there with his thumbs in his pockets looking lost. Sinner shouldered through the crowd. He put a hand on the boy's arm and bent towards his ear to be heard over the music, lightly brushing the boy's crotch with the back of his other hand as he did so. 'You waiting for anyone in particular?'

'No.'

'Come on, then.' Sinner pulled him towards the door.

'Who are you?'

'It don't matter.'

'Where are we going?'

'Hotel de Paris on Villiers Street. I'll pay. They know me. You been before?'

'No, I don't really ... I mean. ...'

Sinner never had any trouble. In a club like this, even the boys as beautiful as Sinner would usually join in the flirtation and gossip. That was why you came to the Caravan instead of just hunting in the dark at the Piccadilly News Theatre. But Sinner didn't have to bother with that – there was something in the way he looked at you and the way he spoke to you. Or at least there was the first time – hardly anyone ever went with him a second time, not only because Sinner himself lost interest, but also because you were still too bruised and shaken, particularly if, like this French boy, you'd been unlucky enough to meet him on a night when he still had half a fight caged in him. Even if you'd been warned, though, you still didn't turn him down. The best you could do was to pick up another pint of gin on the way so there was a chance that, after a last monochrome orgasm, he might pass out by daybreak.

They got to the door and started up the steps to street level just as a man in a black overcoat was making his way down. Sinner looked up. It was Philip Erskine. Sinner stopped.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing here?' he said.

Erskine blanched and started to stutter something.

'You followed me,' said Sinner.

'What?' said Erskine.

'You followed me here. Probably going to kidnap me. Posh cunt.'

Erskine swallowed. 'That's right. I followed you here. I'm sorry.'

Sinner knew that Will Reynolds wouldn't like it if he heard that Sinner had punched a bloke out of his steps, so Sinner just cuffed Erskine hard with the back of his hand. Erskine let out a yelp, then turned, hurried back up the steps, and ran off down Endell Street.

Erskine was back at school. In the dream, he woke up one morning in the dormitory, threw off his sheets, looked down at his body, and saw with horror that during the night he had somehow transformed from an insect into a man.

When he woke up a second time, he was sweaty and glue-mouthed and he had an erection. He had only intended a ten-minute afternoon nap but it was already three o'clock. He was in a small hot room in the United Universities Club on Suffolk Street, where he stayed whenever he was in London, on a mattress packed with knuckles and sinews. The club was old-fashioned and full of awful Cambridge hearties and so dusty he couldn't stop sneezing, but his father had insisted that he join. Very soon, with a bit of diligence, Erskine felt he was certain to acquire lots of fascinating London friends with whom he would be able to dine and lodge as he wished, but so far, at twenty-four years old, the UU was all he really had.

After changing his shirt he went downstairs to the L-shaped coffee room with its heavy maroon curtains half-closed to resist the siege of the summer day, and found Morton, Cripling and Nash sitting around cackling about something. He settled himself beside them in an armchair and tried to work out what was funny. No one greeted him, so he pretended to look over a copy of *The Times*. There was to be a plebiscite in Germany tomorrow to confirm the exciting succession of Herr Hitler.

'I think Nash himself enjoys the occasional "night trip to the great open spaces", don't you, Nash?' Morton was saying. 'Ever the "Bohemian".'

Nash raised his hands in mock-confession. 'I shan't deny it. "After the day's routine", I find it just the thing.' They all brayed again.

Erskine saw that they were looking at some sort of chit or card. 'What's the joke?' he asked.

'Oh, hello, Erskine,' said Morton cheerfully. 'Cripling found this on the floor at his barber's.' Julius Morton had matriculated at Trinity with Erskine, and had once, quite sober, held Erskine down and forced him to gargle port until he threw up into his Ovid, then chuckled about it for days afterwards as if Erskine had been in on the joke all along. Every time Erskine allowed Morton to treat him as a chum the humiliation of that episode, and many others like it, was redoubled, but Erskine didn't really have any choice – particularly since Morton had recently taken a romantic interest in his sister Evelyn, having met her by disastrous coincidence at one of Lady Molly's dances. One of Erskine's many objections to the orthodox eugenic theory of the day was that he knew of no proposed system which would put Morton down for compulsory sterilisation. Or at the very least a flogging.

Erskine's only consolation, in fact, was what he knew of Morton's beloved younger brother. At eight years old the brother had shoved a spade into the wheel of a moving car, which threw him on to his back so hard that he broke his leg and was blinded in one eye by a blow to the temporal lobe of the brain. The leg got better but he soon, unrelatedly, contracted polio. The Mortons' family doctor, a former military man, was called, but, suspecting the boy of malingering, instructed that he should not be put to bed but instead kept active. As a result, Morton's brother had lost the use of his right arm and both his legs, all of which had to be kept in heavy irons, and they itched so unbearably that he was driven almost insane: he would sometimes laugh for no particular reason in uncontrollable simian howls like a vaudeville comedian pretending to have gone mad. Nothing but acute pain could stop him, and his healthy leg ended up badly scarred because he used to burn himself deliberately with cigarettes. This episodic tragedy, which had darkened the lives of Morton's entire family, gave Erskine ceaseless pleasure, like a really good radio serial.

‘What is it?’ he said, taking the card from Morton and reading it over.

Erskine didn’t understand – it seemed to be just an advertisement for a nightclub – but he forced a little laugh anyway, and gave it back. He sat for a few minutes as the three others began to joke about the temperaments of some of their university contemporaries. But as he tried to think of something witty to contribute, he slowly began to realise what they were really discussing, and at last, when Crippling used the expression ‘a bunch of brown hatters’, Erskine was sure. After that, he listened very closely.

But by then the theme was already almost exhausted, and the others soon started to talk about their plans for the evening. As much as he’d heard about the wonderful freedoms of a young bachelor in London, Erskine had found that one’s movements were even more public in a little club like this than they had been in a Cambridge college, so he already had an imaginary dinner with a cousin prepared as an excuse for going out to the fight tonight. And when the other three got up, leaving the car behind, he realised nervously that the excuse could do double-duty. Shaftesbury Avenue was only a few minutes from the United Universities Club. He could easily slip into this Caravan place on the way back from the fight.

In Trinity’s Great Hall he had once overheard part of a conversation along similar lines about a pub called the Marquis of Granby. Then, as now, he had carefully committed the exchange to memory, but it had contained no details of scientific usefulness apart from one crucial remark that ‘in a place like that, one can never be over-dressed’. Erskine consequently concluded that he would have to put on white tie if he was to visit the Caravan, but he could hardly wear that to the boxing match. Luckily, he had already resolved to wear his father’s overcoat on his trip into Spitalfields and keep it on at all times so that he wouldn’t have to come back to Suffolk Street with the ineradicable stench of blood and poverty and herring and Jew on his suit. The tails would not be visible under the overcoat.

He spent the early evening finishing a book by Lord Alfred Douglas called *Plain English*. Douglas, like Erskine, had been in the scholars’ house at Winchester, and Erskine had spent a term working at a desk on which the small carving of an erect penis was reportedly Douglas’ work. What Erskine had read of Wilde and his panderers he found repellent, but when he discovered that ‘Bosie’ had written a book about racial purity he ordered it from the London Library out of curiosity. As he’d expected, it was a crude work, with nothing to say, for instance, about Pitt-Rivers’ interesting but outlandish theory that, in sexual inversion, the great evolutionary consciousness of the species had found a way of hacking off its own least promising lines of inheritance before they could be propagated. Also, the book apparently lacked any of the coded allusions to immorality that Erskine sometimes found so abstractly amusing to identify in works by authors like Douglas, mentally netting and labelling each innuendo like a butterfly.

He ate steak and kidney pie at the club, changed into white tie, put on his gloves, buttoned his overcoat, and then, armoured, took a cab to Premierland. Commercial Road swarmed. The cab nearly ran over an organ-grinder’s monkey pulling at its chain. He’d heard that Thomas Cook took tourists on sightseeing tours of the exotic East End. To Erskine, the urban poor seemed not much different from the rural poor, and he understood neither. Why must they be so ugly and sore-ridden, he wondered? Why must they scream at their own children? Why must they urinate in the street? Plainly no one could desire these indignities for their own sake, so they made sense only as a sort of deliberate, spiteful impudence. On an intellectual level he understood that the condition of these specimens was the result of degenerative miscegenation and insufficient selection pressure, but still somehow, as the son of Celia Erskine, a well-known charitable benefactor, he couldn’t help feeling personally insulted by their obvious lack of gratitude. Had Marx really spent all that time in London? Surely he must have realised that, if these withered grey creatures tried to rise up, the result would be

unpleasant but barely perceptible, like a gust of smoke from a grate in the street.

The match was sold out, so he bought a ticket at four times the original price from a tout in a wheelchair, and found a seat. He looked around. The lights above the ring were enclosed in a black square shade printed with advertisements for an evening paper, and around the ropes were hung red and blue posters with the programme for next week's fight. Although the smelly man next to him kept jostling his shoulder, he felt secure in his overcoat. It wasn't like the theatre – the audience came and went and talked and whistled and drank and even, somehow, slept as they pleased, and boys climbed from row to row shouting, 'Nice apples, twopence' – but then Erskine himself didn't pay much attention to the first two fights. Instead, he looked around for anecdotal observations that he could one day include in a work on eugenics: a charming blonde Anglo-Saxon girl on the arm of some wart-faced toadlike Semite, for instance. Before Erskine had found anything of the sort, however, it was time for Roach vs Pock.

Erskine had first come across Seth 'Sinner' Roach in a copy of *Boxing* that was lying around in the coffee room of his club. Reading Sinner's statistics and looking at his picture, Erskine had been struck by two powerful blows. The first was the very idea that such exquisite sporting prowess could have emerged from a physiological inheritance that was otherwise so wretched, like a peach tree growing from a plague pit – Jewish boxers were not uncommon these days, but what about an awkward, five-foot, nine-toed Jewish boxer who was good enough to be a world champion? The second blow was irritatingly obscure – like knowing you have forgotten something and not knowing what – but Erskine did not have time to pursue it because the case of Seth Roach had helped toward maturity one or two heretical ideas that he was nursing about practical eugenics, and soon he concluded that a close observation of Sinner would be the best way to put them to the test. He took out a subscription to *Boxing*, and when one of Sinner's matches coincided with a visit to London he was determined to attend.

The fight was thrilling. Both fighters glowed like medieval saints. Unlike many sportsmen Erskine had seen, Sinner seemed to take no satisfaction in his own speed and grace and power – they were too much a part of him – he was like a fox or a deer, any creature that is more beautiful because it cannot know it is beautiful, any creature with the courage to contend that the world does not carry on while it is asleep. Hitler had said that 'the German boy of the future must be lithe and slender, swift as a greyhound, tough as leather, and hard as Krupp steel'. Sinner was all that. Hitler hadn't said anything about tall.

And there was something so intimate about these near-naked men fighting their very hardest that Erskine almost wanted to turn away in embarrassment, but he was too rapt. Soon the cheers of the crowd seemed to fall away, and he could hear nothing but the butcher's-counter slap of fist on face.

Then it ended. Erskine was as disappointed as anyone by the sheer cowardice of Pock, who by that point was wet and blinking like someone who hadn't quite saved his dog from drowning in a river. During the ensuing dispute over the foul, Erskine remembered that a match like this was played by the Marquess of Queensberry rules, and wasn't that Lord Alfred Douglas' father, sued by Wilde for calling him, illiterately, a 'sodomite'? Except he wasn't sure if it was the same Marquess of Queensberry. When Sinner knocked Pock out of the ring, he found himself screaming with joy. He wanted Sinner to win so much.

Afterwards he made his way to the dressing room, and stood outside the door for a minute or two before he had the courage to knock. The interview with Sinner was not a success. 'I've had enough of beetles now,' he told the boy. 'I want to study human beings.' This wasn't quite true. Whether or not Sinner complied with his request, Erskine knew that he would probably have to carry on herding insects as long as he lived. For one thing, his father, who funded his studies, would be unhappy at the

abrupt switch from entomology to anthropobiology. But, more importantly, some of his planned eugenic experiments would require hundreds of bloodlines to be followed for hundreds of generations. That was ambitious enough with insects, but probably impossible with humans, unless you had a whole dynasty of scientists working under a whole dynasty of despots. In a truly enlightened society, of course, the two clans would soon fuse: scientists would be despots and despots would be scientists. At least with beetles it was easy enough to be both. Not long ago he'd read a book called *If I Were a Dictator*, by Julian Huxley, whom he'd once met at a cocktail party. Huxley argued that busy shopping streets should have their pavements replaced with moving pneumatic platforms and that sex should be taught in schools, but other parts of his argument were more creditable. 'The true-born Briton is rather proud of his reluctance to become a governmental "guinea-pig",' he wrote. 'In reality this attitude is the product of an irrational and suspicious stupidity on his part, and of an unscientific unplanned action on the part of the State; an atmosphere should and could be created in which to be selected as an experimental object and to serve in the application of science to social progress would be regarded as an honour.'

But this atmosphere was missing from Sinner's dressing room, and Erskine left Premier League almost in tears. He had to trudge a long way down Commercial Road, jostled by passers-by, before he could find a cab. He didn't want to ask the driver to take him to the Caravan, so he got out at the north end of Endell Street and walked up and down it for nearly twenty minutes before he realised that the club was tucked below street level. He stood at the top of the steps gathering his resolve, as he had outside the dressing room, and then started down. And that was when, as in a dream, Sinner came out through the door.

'What the fuck do you think you're doing here?' said the boxer. 'You followed me.'

Actually, for a delirious instant Erskine had assumed the reverse – that Sinner had followed Erskine to Covent Garden to tell him that he'd changed his mind. But that didn't make sense. 'What?' he said, noticing that there was another boy with Sinner. A fellow boxer?

'You followed me here. Probably going to kidnap me. Posh cunt.'

How else could Erskine explain himself? He could be fairly confident that Sinner wouldn't have heard of Pitt-Rivers' Evolutionary Consciousness, or understand that the Caravan was the perfect place to test that theory. Also, it looked as though he might get hit if he tried to argue. So he said, 'That's right. I followed you here. I'm sorry.' And got hit anyway. He had found it strangely challenging to lie to the boy: there was something in his gaze that flayed you bare. He recalled that boxers had to be keen empiricists of human behaviour, so that they could always predict the opponent's next move. Erskine liked to think of himself as a keen empiricist of human behaviour, but the truth was he found it a rather confounding subject, like algebra.

One or two people laughed at him as he hurried down Endell Street. He was suddenly unbearably hot in the carapace of his father's overcoat. Crossing Long Acre, he slowed down, and went into a pub on Bow Street near the Royal Opera House to buy a brandy. He didn't want to go back to his club yet. From the bar he could see out through the window, and a minute later, to his surprise, he caught sight of Sinner and the other boy going past. Even to watch Sinner walk was fascinating: he had a sort of swaggering bounce as if he were still in the ring. Erskine gulped down his drink.

Outside, he pursued the two of them from a distance. They went a long way down the Strand, then turned left into the little mess of short streets beside Charing Cross Station, where he knew he couldn't help being seen if they happened to turn their heads. But neither did, and he was able to watch as Sinner led the boy into the Hotel de Paris. The narrow building was a scuffed, brown-toothed interloper in a relatively smart street. Erskine stood on the corner for ten minutes smoking a cigarette and mentally reviewing all that he knew about perverts in case he should be obliged to pass for one.

then went inside, where a fat man in braces sat behind a counter reading a paperback detective novel and breathing heavily. He asked for a single room for the night and was given a key in return for ten shillings.

‘Expecting any callers later?’ the man said.

‘Definitely not.’

Erskine did not even look at the room number on the key. Instead, he walked the shabby corridors of the Hotel de Paris, wondering which room was Sinner’s, hearing nothing but the creak of his own footsteps and the intestinal groans of the hot water pipes. (Why was he here?) When he’d paced a few floors he chose a room at random, 39, knelt down, and held his ear to the door. Inside he could hear grunting and panting. Could this be Sinner and the other boy, he wondered, his stomach hollow. But when he tried 38, he heard the same; from 37, silence; and from 36, grunting again.

‘What on earth are you up to?’

Erskine looked up. A man who wore eyeshadow, rouge and no shirt was coming out of the communal lavatory. He had his hands on his hips and he spoke in a high-pitched theatrical voice that Erskine found physically nauseating.

‘Nothing,’ Erskine replied, and got to his feet.

‘I’ll be free in about an hour if you’re looking for a bit of—’

‘No!’ Erskine shouted, and, once again, fled. That night, noosed in his sheets at the United Universities Club, he dreamed of two rabbits, one white and one black, strapped together on a surgical table and cut open so that each one’s carotid artery gushed into the other one’s heart. When he awoke choking on blood that wasn’t there, he wondered about the symbolism – he’d read Freud as well as Marx – until he remembered that this image was not a product of his unconscious, but rather a real experiment performed in 1870 by the great Francis Galton, inventor of the word ‘eugenics’, to disprove his cousin Charles Darwin’s theory of pangenesis. ‘It was astonishing to see how quickly the rabbits recovered after the effects of the anaesthetic had passed away,’ Galton had written. ‘It often happened that their spirits and sexual aptitude were in no way dashed by an operation which, only a few minutes before, had changed nearly one half of the blood that was in their bodies.’ Erskine got up and took a very long bath.

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