



VINTAGE

JAKE'S THING
KINGSLEY AMIS

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About the Book

Jake Richardson, an Oxford don nearing sixty with a lifetime's lechery behind him, is in pursuit of his lost libido and heads off to the consulting room of a sex therapist. Not one to disobey a doctor's orders, he runs the full humiliating gamut of sex labs and trendy 'workshops', where more than souls are bared. He decks himself with cunning gadgetry, pets diligently with his wife and browses listlessly through porn magazines behind locked doors. Is sex really worth it? As liberationists abuse him, a campus hostess bores him into bed - and even his own wife starts acting oddly - Jake seriously begins to wonder.

About the Author

Kingsley Amis was born in South London in 1922 and was educated at the City of London School and St John's College, Oxford. After the publication of *Lucky Jim* in 1954, Kingsley Amis wrote over twenty novels, including *The Alteration*, winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, *The Old Devils*, winner of the Booker Prize in 1986, and *The Biographer's Moustache*, which was to be his last book. He also wrote on politics, education, language, films, television, restaurants and drink. Kingsley Amis was awarded the CBE in 1981 and received a knighthood in 1990. He died in October 1995.

ALSO BY KINGSLEY AMIS

Fiction

Lucky Jim
That Uncertain Feeling
I Like It Here
Take a Girl Like You
One Fat Englishman
The Anti-Death League
I Want It Now
The Green Man
Girl, 20
The Riverside Villas Murder
Ending Up
The Crime of the Century
The Alteration
Collected Short Stories
Russian Hide-and-Seek
Stanley and the Women
The Old Devils
Difficulties with Girls
The Folks that Live on the Hill
The Russian Girl
Mr Barrett's Secret and Other Stories
You Can't Do Both
The Biographer's Moustache

Verse

A Case of Samples
A Look Round the Estate
Collected Poems 1944-79
The New Oxford Book of Light Verse (editor)
The Faber Popular Reciter (editor)

The Amis Anthology (editor)

Non-Fiction

New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction

The Golden Age of Science Fiction (editor)

The James Bond Dossier

What Became of Jane Austen?

On Drink

Rudyard Kipling and his World

Harold's Years (editor)

Every Day Drinking

How's Your Glass?

The Amis Collection: Selected Non-Fiction 1954-1990

Memoirs

With Robert Conquest

Spectrum I, II, III, IV, V (editor)

The Egyptologists

To Pat Kavanagh

Jake's Thing

Kingsley Amis

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1 This Is It

'WHEN DID YOU first notice something was wrong?'

'Well, notice, it must be five or six weeks, I could give you the date if I had to. But then as soon as I did notice I realised something had been wrong much further back than that.'

'How much further back?'

'Oh. . . . A year? Year and a half?'

'About the time your other trouble started to become acute, in fact.'

'Yes. There must be a link.'

By way of answer the doctor gave a quiet sigh. His patient, a round-faced bespectacled man called Jake Richardson, was left to wonder whether this meant that the link was all too grimly real, that only a fool would suppose one existed or that the task of explanation seemed altogether daunting. Jake didn't wonder for long. To have gone on doing so would have been to concede the doctor (Curnow by name) too much importance. When asked why he persistently went to a man he had so little time for, Jake would say that disliking your GP was a good insurance against getting dependent on him.

Now Dr Curnow shook his head a few times and swallowed. In the end he said, 'There's nothing I can do for you.'

'Oh, but surely you must have a—'

'No. The only way is for me to send you to someone.'

'That was rather what I—'

'Excuse me a second, would you please?'

Funny how it's got ruder to say please than not, Jake thought to himself as the doctor began to turn slowly through a small leather-bound book on his desk. He seemed to find its contents of unusual interest, even novelty. One page in particular absorbed his attention for longer than would have been necessary if he had been doing no more than reading the whole of it with care. After this interval he lifted his head abruptly and looked Jake straight in the eye for a quarter of a minute or so. Then he returned his gaze to the book before him, keeping it fixed there while he reached for his telephone. It had buttons instead of a dial.

'Dr Rosenberg? Dr Curnow here.' This information was enough to provoke a considerable speech from the other end, though Jake couldn't make out anything of what was said. 'I have a patient you might be able to do something for,' said Curnow at last. 'I have him here in the room with me. Name of Richardson, J. C. Richardson. . . . Well, you'll remember the Mr Pickering I sent to you last autumn. . . . Oh did he, I'm sorry to hear that. . . . Yes, I'm afraid so. . . .' What Curnow heard next made him stare at Jake again but more consideringly, look him over rather than look at him. 'Certainly not. No question of anything like that. . . .' Curnow's face changed, except for the direction and quality of his stare, and he started nodding emphatically. 'Oh yes, very much so. . . . Yes, the perfect description. . . . Oh really? You will? . . . I'll ask him.' Curnow arranged an appointment for the following week, listened with a grave, responsible expression to a final passage of words from far (from not all that far, actually, just a couple of hundred yards up Harley Street) and rang off.

'A very able man, Dr Rosenberg. Very able.'

'Good,' said Jake. 'Rosenberg. Presumably he's some sort of—'

'Would you excuse me a second, please?' Curnow lifted a switch on what he no doubt called his intercom, which had started to hum hoarsely. 'Yes, what is it?'

'Sheikh Qarmat bin Ezzat el Sha'ket is here,' said a version of a girl's voice.

'Bring him in in thirty seconds precisely and cash as he leaves of course,' said Curnow, getting up. 'Well, Mr Richardson, you'll be letting me know how things go. Insides behaving themselves?'

'Oh, mustn't complain.'

'That's right. No pain in the abdomen?'

'Just a twinge or so, nothing out of the way.'

'Urine satisfactorily pale?'

'Yes thank you.'

'Faeces satisfactorily dark?'

'Yes.'

'What about the haemorrhoids?'

'You mean piles. I haven't got piles,' said Jake truthfully. 'I don't have them.'

The doctor chuckled and shrugged his shoulders, tolerant of his patient's nervous or whimsical avoidance of the topic. 'Getting plenty of exercise?'

'I thought I was supposed to take it easy.'

'Mild exercise. Walking. Gardening. Didn't you say you gardened?'

'Yes I did. I do.'

'Keep on with it. It can't fail to do you good. Whatever's wrong with you.'

'Thank you, Dr Curnow.'

In the hall the man of the East, clad quite as if he had just arrived from there, without even time to freshen up after the journey, was approaching across a carpet that looked as if it had once taken a similar course: no doubt the gift of some grateful emir or caliph. The receptionist, a girl of twenty or twenty-five, was in attendance. Jake noticed that her breasts were either remarkably large or got up to seem so by a professional. He tried to reckon the chances of Curnow's knowing which and felt downcast for a moment, because any chance at all was too much. But almost at once he

cheered up again: between the front door and that of the waiting-room there moved a fellow-patient he had seen at least once before under this roof, moved with new and extreme labour, one leg straight and stiff, the other bent and stiff. Teach him, thought Jake. Not me yet, he also thought.

As one who did what doctors said while still rather looking down on them, he decided to walk to Warren Street and catch a 127 bus instead of taking a taxi. That in any case wouldn't have been as easy as winking in this area. No sooner had one black, brown or yellow person, or group of such, been set down on the pavement than Americans, Germans, Spaniards were taken up and vice versa. It was just after four o'clock on a fine afternoon early in April. Jake lengthened his stride and crossed the road in front of a double-parked car, large, black and with CD plates. An unmistakable witch-doctor, in equally manifest need of outside help, was doing his best to alight from it. Portland Place turned out to be easily as full of north-bound vehicles, most of them cars, as might have been expected at this hour on Wednesday in Holy Week, no less so than it would doubtless turn out to be on 23rd December or, this year, more likely 22nd. Despite their intermittent and slow progress, Jake waited for the lights to change before he left the kerb. He had made this a rule ever since a momentarily near miss by a motorbike the previous year. The traffic going the other way was much lighter but no faster, thanks to some extensive roadworks with nobody working on them.

By contrast, though not altogether by contrast, Euston Road resembled a motor-racing track, or a network of such. Jake felt some relief at reaching the northern side undamaged. He waved and smiled cheerily at an old friend he couldn't have named for the moment and the old friend, who had just come out of Thames Television House, waved and smiled cheerily back a couple of seconds before Jake realised he wasn't an old friend but the chap who played the

superintendent in that police series. Oh Christ, thought Jake; still, the bugger must get a lot of that.

Half an hour later, having been carried up through Camden Town, Chalk Farm and Hampstead, Jake got off the 127 at the stop outside the Orris Park National Westminster Bank. He was about to start the five-minute walk to his house when his eye fell on the window of Winesteals Ltd and an ill-written notice that nevertheless clearly proclaimed Crazy Cuts: 10p in the £ off everything this week only. He hesitated only a moment. He had brought himself to go and see his doctor, he had responsibly taken a bit of exercise, he had saved something like £1.20 by not taking a taxi home, and he was fed up with Tunisian Full-Bodied Red Table Wine (Dry) every night of his life. Into the shop he darted and over to the French corner. Côtes de Nuits Villages 1971 at £2.05 less presumably 20½p? Beaune Clos de la Mousse 1972 at. . . . To hell with it: Château Talbot 1967 at £4.09 less whatever the fuck. On his way to what people probably meant by the check-out he noticed a pile of boxes of liqueur chocolates and hesitated again, longer this time. £2.17, but that wasn't what was at stake. In the end he took a box.

Ahead of him at the till stood a customer in very dirty whitish overalls smoking a cigar and chatting to the senior of the two shopmen present while the junior cast up what he was buying.

'Is it worth it?' he asked a couple of times. 'This is it. If it isn't, I don't want to know. If it isn't, I'm not interested. If it is, then this is it. I mean, this is it. Right?'

'Right.'

'And it is. It bloody is. Like everything else.' As he talked the overalled man took a roll of £20 notes from his side pocket and counted some out; Jake thought five but wasn't sure. 'It bloody is. Twelve-year-old's better than eight-year-old and '61's going to be better than '62. I mean, you know, this is it. Ever tried Jack Daniel's Green Label?'

'No.'

'Worth trying.' Change was handed over, not much. 'Ta. Yeah, worth trying. Shows you the Black's worth it. Green's good, though. Well, cheers.'

'Cheers.'

Jake moved along, put his two items down on the stub of counter and set himself to see which buttons on his machine the junior shopman would prod. 3, then one he missed, so he gave up and waited for the receipt slip to be torn off and wordlessly handed to him. He screwed up his eyes. 003.69, 002.17, 006.86. He went on looking while the senior shopman drew in air through his nose.

'Er, the. . . . You've charged the full price for the chocolates.'

'Right.'

'But your notice says 10p in the pound off everything.'

'Everything bar chocolates and smokes.'

'But it says everything.'

'It means everything bar chocolates and smokes.'

'But. . . .'

'You want them, do you, squire?'

' . . . Yes.'

'Right.'

After a short pause, during which he took a blow on the kneecap from the corner of a wire basket in the hand of a man in a blue boiler-suit, Jake paid, picked up his goods and left, remembering he should have said Cheers just as the exit door swung shut after him. Out in the street he noticed that away from the sunlight the air was chilly: the spring had begun late and wet. There were still a few dead leaves half beaten into the triangular patch of bare earth bounded by concrete, probably due to become a communal flower-bed any day, at the corner of the High Street and Burgess Avenue. The near end of the latter consisted of two longish brick terraces put up a hundred years before to house the workers at some vanished local industry and these days much in demand among recently married couples, pairs of

homosexuals and older persons whose children had left or never existed. Jake had bought no. 47 in 1969; he couldn't have afforded to now.

2 The Farting Ploughboy

THE HOUSE STOOD out among its neighbours by not having had anything done to its outside: no stucco, no curious chimneys, no colourful shutters, no trailing ferns in wire baskets, front door and window-frames and drain-pipes not painted cinnabar or orpiment or minium or light mushroom, and garden neither turned into a tiny thicket nor altogether removed to accommodate a car. Having no car had made it comparatively easy for Jake to prevent that last option but some of the others had taken toll of his powers of resistance. He opened and then shut the gate, which was not of wrought iron or imitation bronze, walked up the eight yards of gravel path and let himself in.

A great deal had managed to get itself done to the inside of no. 47 because so much of it was in items small in themselves and capable of being introduced a bit at a time. He was also at the mercy of the view that whatever rights a man might have over the exterior of his dwelling lapse by definition once its threshold is crossed. The place was full of things. It had to be admitted that some of these weren't as small as all that, like the heavy-duty cheval-glass near the front door and the giant's coffin-sized Dutch (or some such) dock in the alcove by the sitting-room fireplace, but a lot were. No flat surface except the ceiling and parts of the floor was free of ashtrays bearing quotations from poem and song, serious souvenir mugs and antique paperweights, and screens supplemented the walls for the hanging of small pictures enclosed in large mounts and photographs of dead strangers. It was hard to find a square foot that hadn't been made nice.

The person who had brought all this about was Jake's fat wife Brenda, who stood up, brushing cake-crumbs off her knee-length fisherman's-knit cardigan, to be kissed on the cheek by him. He went over and greeted similarly her old friend Alcestis Mabbott, who was fat too, not as fat as Brenda but short with it. And then Alcestis's hair stood away from her head in a stiff dun froth while Brenda's, though no more vivid, was smooth and abundant, so that almost anybody would have decided that Brenda had the better of things between the two of them.

'Hallo, Allie dear,' said Jake. 'What a nice surprise.'

'I told you she was coming,' said Brenda.

'Did you, darling? I must have forgotten.'

One way or the other the presence of Alcestis was certainly a surprise to Jake. If it hadn't been he wouldn't have come carting his recent purchases into the sitting-room like a boy back from the fair. It was on them, as he could have predicted without the least trouble, that Alcestis's round-eyed gaze instantly fell.

'Been shopping, have we?' she asked gruffly. It wasn't a tone or vocal quality adopted for the occasion. On their first meeting, round about ten years earlier at a dinner-party in some cultural crapper south of the river, Jake had come really close to congratulating her on a marvellous imitation, unasked for though it was, of the way retired colonels were supposed to talk. All that had deterred him was puzzlement about why she thought it went well with the detailed account she was giving him of how she had made the unpleasant dress she had on. Then, soon after she had switched the focus of attention to the new wallpaper she was going to have in her dining-room and kept her voice the same, he had got it. Whenever he considered he had done something particularly foolish, which wasn't often, he would cheer himself up by remembering that at least he'd never made a pass at Alcestis ('Smudger' to him in his thoughts).

He answered her question, or anyhow spoke while looking at her. 'Just one or two odd things.'

'One of them looks to me like a very odd thing indeed.' She meant the bottle which, though wrapped in brown paper, was obviously either a bottle or an object shaped just like a bottle.

Forewarned of he knew not quite what, Jake put it down on a tiled coffee-table slightly to his rear and said to his wife, 'Got you a little something.'

'Ooh. . . .' Brenda moved her spectacles from the top of her head to the region of her nose and uncovered the liqueur chocolates. 'Oh, darling, you really shouldn't.'

'Nonsense, everybody deserves a bit of a—'

'I mean you *shouldn't*, darling,' said Brenda. Her eyes, unlike her friend's, were long from corner to corner and also bright, both in the intensity of their greenish colour and in the shining of their surfaces even through glass. Jake had never forgotten the first time they had been turned full on him: not where or when, just how they had looked. 'You know, this is exactly what I'm not supposed to have because they're sugar and booze and I can't resist them. It's very sweet of you but honestly.'

'You haven't got to dispose of the whole—'

'I'm sure good old Jake'll give you a hand if you're well and truly stuck. Always ready to help out, our Jake, eh, what?' Alcestis didn't actually utter the last two words but they were there in the way she rocked her long head to and fro and pushed her lips up afterwards.

'I should jolly well hope so, I can tell you,' said Jake, and saw Brenda give him a sharp glance over the top of her glasses. He added hastily, 'I mean that's right, I can always —'

'What absolutely fills me with the most burning curiosity is the question of what's inside the other parcel, the chappie over there.'

‘Well, it’s a . . . a *bottle* actually of all things, Allie. With drink corked up inside it.’

‘Absolutely agog.’

The two women waited. Jake reached out and snatched up the bottle and tore the paper off it as fast as he could. In wine-waiter style he displayed the label to Alcestis, who nodded several times and gave a grunt or so of approval. There was another pause.

‘I wonder. . . .’ said Alcestis. ‘Of course it is a bit on the early side.’

‘Would you like a glass?’ asked Brenda.

‘Well, I must say, I don’t normally, I—’

‘Come on, do you good, why not, fill your boots, great stuff, that’s the spirit.’ It wasn’t (Jake saw) that Alcestis had guessed he had been going to give himself a treat which she had maliciously decided to impair, nor that she had simply fancied a glass of wine: she had sensed, without realising that she had sensed, that he hoped she wouldn’t ask him for one and so naturally had asked him for one, or better still had got herself asked to have one. ‘Shan’t be a jiffy.’

Along in the kitchen he got going fast. Off with the vile plastic foil they put round the necks of bottles these days and out with the cork; same treatment for a bottle of Tunisian Full-Bodied Red Table Wine (Dry). Now a jug, or rather pair of jugs.

‘I remember as if it were yesterday,’ he said as he worked. ‘Jerry had given our lads a fearful pasting round St Quentin and Compiègne and most of us thought that when the big push came in the spring we’d be done for. Not a word of a lie. Literally. I said done for and I meant done for.’ He raised his voice. ‘Where’s the bloody corkscrew? Oh, here it is—all right—got it.’

By this time he had the two wines in jugs of their own and was pouring the Château Talbot into the Tunisian bottle. A jet aircraft came into earshot.

'There were men in my battalion who'd gawn six months without sleep and the average life of a subaltern in the front line was thirty seconds. Absolute gospel. Literally. Then one day in the shithouse at Division I ran into old Bugger Cockface who I'd known at Eton and Sandhurst and in the Crimea and at Spion Kop.' The jet was almost overhead. 'And I said to him, I said, "Are we done for, Bugger?" and he said, "By George not yet, Smudger," and I thought, damn fine soldier, damn fine Englishman, damn fine feller, what? What? *What?*'

'I said what on earth are you doing? You've been simply ages.'

Brenda had spoken. Alcestis was at her side. The two must have stolen up on him under the noise of the aircraft, which had begun to recede. Jake hoped he hadn't turned round too abruptly. There stood near him the two bottles each filled with what had been in the other and the jugs not noticeable. He said,

'Just. . . . It took me a while to find the—'

'Two bottles,' said Alcestis. 'I say, are we having a piss-up?'

'That one's for dinner-time. These cheap plonks, if you take the cork out a couple of hours before you—'

'Tunisian Full-Bodied. . . . This is good enough for me.'

'No really, it won't have—'

'Suit me down to the ground. I'm not a connoisseur chappie like you.'

'No, the other one's much—'

'No, you have that with your dinner. Able to appreciate it, mm?'

'I'd far rather—'

It was no good: she had noticed, again unconsciously, that he now wanted her to have what a minute earlier he hadn't wanted her to have, and maintained the appropriate reaction. (She must have grasped too that something was going on in the kitchen because he hadn't been out there

that long.) Back in the sitting-room she took a sip and raised her unabundant eyebrows.

'I think this is awfully good, Jake. What did you pay for it if you don't mind my asking?'

He took a gulp. Although he much preferred drink with food he was fucked if he was going to, etc. 'I don't know,' he said a little wildly. 'One twenty-five . . . ten. . . .'

'Where? No don't tell me, no point, memory like a sieve. Of course, I suppose with your experience and your palate, easy. Brenda love, aren't you drinking?'

'No, I'm cutting down,' said Brenda. She went to the tea-tray, poured herself a cup and added milk and three lumps of sugar.

'But you're . . .' said Jake and stopped.

'I'm what?'

'You're . . . entitled to break the rules once in a way.' He was acting on the principle that every drop of claret outside Alcestis was a drop saved. 'Let me get you a glass.'

'No thank you.' She spoke sharply.

'What have you been up to today, Jake?'

Distracted by Brenda's tone, which had led him to start reviewing his words and actions in the short time since he'd entered the house, he answered Alcestis without thinking. 'Seeing the doctor.'

'Oh.' She drew him down to sit beside her on the padded bamboo settee. 'Anything . . . troublesome?'

'Not really,' said Jake, who had recovered his wits enough to try to spread a little embarrassment. 'What you might call a man's thing.'

'I see.'

'I don't expect to die of it exactly.'

'Good,' she said, laying her hand on his shoulder for a moment. 'Do you care for Curnow terribly?'

'No, but I trust his judgement.'

'Neither do I, but Geoffrey swears by him.' She referred to her husband. 'He's Cornish, Curnow, you know. Like Michael

Foot.'

'Is he?'

'Oh yes my dear, in fact his name's Cornish for Cornish. Worse than the Welsh. Oh yes.'

'Ah.'

'Can I finish my story now, Brenda love?'

'Oh yes Allie, do.' This time Brenda's tone was warm but the warmth was firmly vectored on her friend.

'I was just getting into it when you turned up, Jake.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, just to put you in the picture very briefly, Brenda's probably told you about the trouble we had with our drains last year. Well, the plumber was simply charming. Young fellow, very good-looking, extremely intelligent, all that. Now I can't quite explain it, but he rather fell for old Geoffrey and me. Nothing was too much trouble any hour of the day or night, brought us some little cake affairs his wife had made—cookies, brought *her* along one evening, said she'd been making his life a misery, always on at him to take her to see the people he'd told her so much about. Anyway, some time in the summer he said he'd had enough, of this country that is: no freedom, take all your money off you, won't let you work harder and better yourself. If you want to put it crudely, he felt his initiative was being strangled. Well, to cut a long story short he got a job in Nigeria and went off there with wife and two young kids for good. Emigrated. Out. Gone. Bang. This was last October, that's nearly . . . six months . . . ago.'

Alcestis paused, put the palms of her hands together and rested her chin on her thumbs. Jake asked himself which way it was going to go: Minister of Plumbing, uranium strike, massive diamond find, fleet of Cadillacs, gold bed? Surely not, and preferably not too in the case of a moron and pervert on the present scale: wild-life reserve trip, safari camp, freedom fighters, tribal ritual, cut off his, forced to eat. . . .

'And then, just last week, we had some news. A letter. I knew straight away who it was from by the stamp. I mean we don't know anyone else out there. I just opened it without thinking, as one would. No idea what was in it. Geoffrey was with me. And what it said, quite simply and straightforwardly, was this. Everything had gone fine, they have a lovely house, got on splendidly with all the people there, job's evidently exactly what he wanted, the whole thing. Now don't you think that's marvellous?'

'*Oh* how exciting,' said Brenda.

Jake was close to tears. In that moment he saw the world in its true light, as a place where nothing had ever been any good and nothing of significance done: no art worth a second look, no philosophy of the slightest appositeness, no law but served the state, no history that gave an inkling of how it had been and what had happened. And no love, only egotism, infatuation and lust. He was glad when, two or twenty-two minutes later, Geoffrey Mabbott turned up, and not just because the fellow's purpose was to take Alcestis away; he was actually glad to see Geoffrey himself, even offered him wine. By now this seemed almost natural, unimportant: Jake's feelings of self-identification with Graham Greene's whisky priest, who sat helplessly by while greedy berks drank the wine he had meant to use at a communion, had reached their peak when old Smudger, what there was of her eyebrows again raised, silently held out her glass for a second dose after bringing her plumber story to its climax.

Rotten bastards might have said that Geoffrey was Alcestis's third husband just as Brenda was Jake's third wife, but they would have been getting the just-as part all wrong. Just as was just as it wasn't. Jake had had two unsatisfactory former wives, or so he would have put it; Alcestis had exercised a mysterious attraction and then an unmysterious repulsion on two former husbands, the second of whom had had to resort to fatal coronary disease to get away from her.

It was to be presumed that Geoffrey was in some uncertain intermediate state. That would at any rate be typical: he was in uncertain states of one sort or another far more than not. One of his specialities was the inverted pyramid of piss, a great parcel of attitudes, rules and catchwords resting on one tiny (if you looked long and hard enough) point. Thus it was established beyond any real doubt that his settled antipathy to all things Indian, from books and films about the Raj to Mrs Gandhi, whom by a presumably related crotchet he took to be a daughter-in-law of the Mahatma, was rooted in Alcestis's second husband's mild fondness for curries. His preference for Holland's gin over the London and Plymouth varieties, often-mentioned partiality for cream cakes and habit of flying by KLM had been less certainly connected with his possession of a sketch by Van Dyck, whom on a good day he might very well have supposed to have been a Dutchman. How he managed to be a buyer for a firm of chutney-manufacturers, or indeed be paid for doing anything, was an enigma, a riddle. His taste in clothes was odd too.

He frowned, as he so often did, when he looked at the wine-bottle, and said nothing at first. Jake waited expectantly, running his eye over Geoffrey's conventional dark-grey suit, self-striped orange shirt, pink bow-tie and thick-heeled white shoes: what far-distant event, rumour or surmise was plodding on its way to decide the issue for him?

'It's frightfully good, darling,' said his wife.

'Mm.' Then all at once his brow cleared and he spoke with his usual liveliness. 'First-rate notion. Thanks, I'd love some. You know, these Middle East wines are about the best value there is these days. Algerian, of course. And some very, very decent Moroccan red I had the other day.' (He must have remembered being annoyed by a Jew, or meeting or seeing one, thought Jake as he handed him his glass.) 'Oh, thanks most awfully. Mm. Well, it's no vintage claret, but it's a good honest drink. Better than tequila, anyway.'

'It's certainly that,' said Jake. 'But aren't they rather different types of drink?'

'Aren't which?'

'Wine and tequila.'

'Well of course they are, that's what I'm saying. Wine comes from grapes and tequila comes from cactuses.'

'Well actually it's a—'

'Vile stuff. Make it in the Argentine, don't they?'

'Mexico, I think.'

'Really? Ever been there?'

'No, never,' said Jake lightly, and added even more lightly, 'You, er . . . you been there, Geoffrey?'

'Me? But. . . . Why should I have been there?' Geoffrey's frown was turning his forehead white in patches. 'I've never even been to the States, let alone South America.'

'Actually Mexico's in—'

It must have been that Alcestis felt she had done enough in the way of holding her mouth open in a smile and blinking her eyes quickly to show how bowled over she still was by her husband even after all these (five? seven?) years. Certainly she changed her expression to one of a kind of urgency and said, 'Some of this modern architecture they've got in Mexico City, finest in the world you know, especially the museums and the university. *And* some of the blocks of flats and offices. Something to do with the use of materials. Just nothing like it anywhere.'

She ended up looking at Jake, so he said, 'How did you, er . . .?'

'Common knowledge.'

Oh I see.'

'How are you, Brenda dear?' Geoffrey spoke as if in greeting, but the two had exchanged warm hugs and several words on his arrival; it was just that he hadn't noticed her since then.

'Fat,' said Brenda, and everyone laughed; Jake saw that Alcestis put her head back further than usual, to show that

she knew what had been said was a *joke*. Brenda went on to ask Geoffrey how he was.

‘About the same, thanks. Yes, very much the same. Well, no, actually, not really. All right if I have a slice of this? One of my weaknesses, this sort of stuff.’

On Brenda’s nod he picked up a large slice of cream cake and ate it carefully, his eyes fixed straight ahead of him. He was concentrating either on what to say next or on the cake, a small problem cleared up when he swallowed finally, said ‘Quite delicious’ and emptied his glass.

‘In what way aren’t you the same?’ asked Brenda.

‘Not what?’

‘You said you weren’t—’

‘Oh, that’s right. Well, that’s a jolly good instance. Physically no problem, just getting older as who isn’t. It’s concentration. You know the sort of thing I mean—you go up to your bedroom to get a clean handkerchief and when you get there you’ve forgotten why you’ve come and have to go back downstairs to where you started. Quite normal up to a point. But with me, I’ve got to the stage where I take a cup over to the stove to pour some tea into it and find there’s one there already, from . . . half a minute before. And then I have to taste it to see if I’ve put sugar in. Now that’s still just annoying. As I say, it just adds on a few seconds to some of the things I do. But . . . er . . . the . . . silliest part is what I’m thinking about instead of what I’m doing. It’s me I’m thinking about, and that’s not a very interesting subject. I mean, if a chap’s thinking about his, er, his mathematics instead of his teacup, or his . . . symphony, then that’s all right, that’s reasonable. It’s in proportion. But me—I ask you!’

Geoffrey had not departed from his cheerful tone. The two women laughed affectionately. Jake held up the wine bottle, which still held about a glassful, but Geoffrey smiled and shook his head and went on as before.

'And the stupidest thing of the lot is, I don't think poor old me, or poor old me in the financial sense, though I jolly well could like everybody else these days, and certainly not *brilliant* old me. Just, just me. It's not enough, you know.'

'It certainly is not by a long chalk,' said Alcestis, going up to her husband and putting her arm through his. 'I only married you because you were the most boring chap I knew so nobody but me could stand you. Now I'm going to take you home, or rather you're going to take me home and we'll leave these good people in peace.'

'Why don't you stay to supper?' asked Brenda. 'There's nothing very much but I'm sure you and I could knock something up, Allie.'

' . . . Yes, do,' said Jake.

'No, sweet of you, but we've tried your patience long enough already.' Alcestis embraced Jake briefly. 'Come along Mabbott, let's hit the trail.'

By custom Brenda saw the visitors out while Jake stayed behind in the sitting-room. Normally at such a time he could count on a good five minutes to himself, but today it was only a few seconds before he heard the front door slam and his wife approach along the passage.

3 Domestic Interior

'WHEN THE BISHOP farted we were amused to hear about it,' said Jake. 'Should the ploughboy find treasure we must be told. But when the ploughboy farts . . . er . . . keep it to yourself.'

Brenda had started putting the tea things together, not very loudly. With her back turned she said in her dear soprano, 'Did you make that up?'

'Free translation of one of Martial's epigrams.'

'Quite good, I suppose.'

'It enshrines a principle poor old Allie would do well to—'

A saucer whizzed into the empty fireplace and broke. 'You leave Allie alone! You did quite enough when she was here!'

'What? I didn't do anything at all.'

'Much! I know you can't be expected to like my friends, that isn't reasonable, why should you, we can't all be the same, I don't necessarily like your friends.' Brenda was talking very fast, though not for the moment quite at the pitch to be expected from someone who had reached the crockery-throwing stage. Now she paused and bit her lower lip and gave a shaky sigh. 'But I don't see why you feel you have to make your low opinion of my friends so devastatingly crystal-clear!'

Jake heard the last part with annoyance and some self-reproof. He had thought his behaviour to the Mabbotts a showpiece of hypocritical cordiality. And now he came to think of it, hadn't Brenda said something of this sort the last time they had seen Alcestis, or the time before? 'I haven't got a low opinion of Allie,' he said with an air of slight surprise, 'I just find her a bit of a—'

'She knows exactly what you find her, she's not a fool whatever you may think, though even a fool could tell. The way you imitate her and take the mickey out of her and the way your face goes when she tells a story and the way you *sit*, I didn't think it was a very terrific story either but she wouldn't have told it if you hadn't shut her up and absolutely sat on her about the doctor and brought the whole conversation to an absolute full stop. You used to quite like her, I can't understand it.'

'I didn't want to discuss the doctor with her, obviously.' Jake poured out the last of the wine. He longed for a smoke but had given it up four years previously and was determined to stick to that. There were no cigarettes in the house anyway.

'You still had no need to sit on her and be crushing,' said Brenda in about the same tone as before. Although she was standing above him she talked with her chin raised, a mannerism that had stood her in good stead since she began to put on weight. 'And I don't know what she thought when she finished her story and you just *sat* there as if you hadn't heard a word, or rather I *do*.'

'I didn't realise it was over at first. I honestly thought that couldn't be the end. And what do you mean she wouldn't have told it if I hadn't shut her up about the doctor? She'd already started to tell it to you before I got back, that was quite clear.'

'I meant she wouldn't have gone on with it. She'd been telling it to me because it was a tiny little thing in her life that she thought might interest me for about five seconds. That's what old friends do when there's just the two of them together, or didn't you know that? I tell her the same sort of thing all the time. We don't go on swapping translations of epigrams by Martial hour after hour.'

'No of course you don't, I quite see,' said Jake mildly, as opposed to saying harshly that that would be all right if the