RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Malice in Wonderland

Nicholas Blake

CONTENTS

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Nicholas Blake
Title Page

PART I: *Mr. Perry Observes*
Chapter I
Chapter II
Chapter III
Chapter IV
Chapter V
Chapter VI
Chapter VII
Chapter VIII

PART II: *Mr. Thistlethwaite Measures Up*
Chapter IX
Chapter X
Chapter XI
Chapter XII
Chapter XIII
Chapter XIV
Chapter XV
Chapter XVI

PART III: *Mr. Strangeways Takes Tea*
Chapter XVII
Chapter XVIII

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About the Book

Private detective Nigel Strangeways receives a call for help from Wonderland, a new holiday camp that has recently opened only to be plagued by a series of cruel practical jokes conducted by someone calling themselves ‘The Mad Hatter’.

The camp’s owners are convinced a rival firm, desperate to put them out of business, is behind the events. Or could it be a disgruntled employee, or even one of the four hundred guests currently staying at the camp? As the pranks become increasingly dangerous and tensions rise, Nigel must do all he can to uncover the Mad Hatter’s true identity – before it’s too late.

About the Author

Nicholas Blake was the pseudonym of Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis, who was born in County Laois, Ireland, in 1904. After his mother died in 1906, he was brought up in London by his father, spending summer holidays with relatives in Wexford. He was educated at Sherborne School and Wadham College, Oxford, from which he graduated in 1927. Blake initially worked as a teacher to supplement his income from his poetry writing and he published his first Nigel Strangeways novel, *A Question of Proof*, in 1935. Blake went on to write a further nineteen crime novels, all but four of which featured Nigel Strangeways, as well as numerous poetry collections and translations.

During the Second World War he worked as a publications editor in the Ministry of Information, which he used as the basis for the Ministry of Morale in *Minute for Murder*, and after the war he joined the publishers Chatto & Windus as an editor and director. He was appointed Poet Laureate in 1968 and died in 1972 at the home of his friend, the writer Kingsley Amis.

Also by Nicholas Blake

A Question of Proof
Thou Shell of Death
There's Trouble Brewing
The Beast Must Die
The Widow's Cruise
The Case of the Abominable Snowman
The Smiler with the Knife
Minute for Murder
Head of a Traveller
The Dreadful Hollow
The Whisper in the Gloom
End of Chapter
The Worm of Death
The Sad Variety
The Morning After Death

NICHOLAS BLAKE

Malice in Wonderland

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART I

Mr. Perry Observes

I

YOUNG MR. PERRY was going to camp. Not a Territorial camp, nor a Scout camp, nor yet a Concentration camp. No, a very different lay-out indeed; a camp which would have made any nomad tribesman rub his eyes in amazement and take to his heels; one, Mr. Perry hoped, that would provide lavish material for the note-books which weighed down the suitcase in the rack over his head.

With mild approval young Mr. Perry eyed the factories that flashed past into the wake of the train. Factories were permissible, to be encouraged even. Temples of the Machine. Mr. Perry, who had never worked at bench or conveyor-belt, was all for the Machine. Of course, there were factories and factories. One did not altogether allow those factories of an earlier day, ramshackle, all bits and pieces, leaking steam from every joint like superannuated dragons, standing amidst a desolation of rank grass, rusty boilers, discarded equipment, which studded the countryside where Mr. Perry had been brought up. Those gothic survivals of laissez-faire and individualist rapacity had served their purpose. History, as Mr. Perry put it to himself, had passed them by. There might be a certain romantic aspect in their decay; but, with all deference to the early Auden, whose weakness for rusting metal and escaping steam was a notorious instance of the foibles of genius, one must insist that such romanticism would not do.

Mr. Perry, for his part, upheld the neo-classicism. He liked things to look prosperous and ship-shape. That factory over there, for instance, standing by itself amid green fields, white, spruce and functional as a gun-boat on the Chinese station—his heart warmed to it, particularly

when it was shown to have been the last outpost of civilisation. For now the train had entered pure countryside, and for Mr. Perry the country was not so much lamentable as non-existent. People lived there, no doubt, for strange reasons of their own; but they were not people in the sense he understood the word: they were not crowds; and Mr. Perry quite genuinely felt at home only in a crowd —apart from the fact that crowds were, so to speak, his business.

Averting his eyes from this barren spectacle of cows, barns and orchards, he turned to the proper study of mankind, his fellow-passengers. There were three of them in the compartment, a family party. An elderly woman, gazing placidly out at the scenery: a blonde, her daughter, who was lapping up *Film Frolics*: and the paterfamilias. The latter was certainly, for Mr. Perry, the show piece. A man of preternatural fatness, whose belly dwarfed even the *Times* newspaper that half covered it, his face a mass of folds and creases, his clothes miraculously uncreased. He wore a black cutaway coat, decorously striped trousers, and an old-fashioned cravat. His face, huge and grave, resembled that of a bloodhound afflicted with an excess of thyroid. He might have sat as model for the caricature of a Capitalist in a Bolshie newspaper.

The man caught Mr. Perry's eye, laid down his copy of the *Times* very deliberately, and, with an unobtrusive, cathedral sort of gesture towards the green, printed label on Mr. Perry's suitcase, said:

"I perceive that you too, sir, are going to Wonderland."

At this moment the train took its cue and, like Alice, plunged into a tunnel. The clattering din precluded conversation, so that Mr. Perry was free to analyse the tones in which that monumental figure had addressed him. They had been solemn and portentous as those of a whole Dean and Chapter discussing the question of grouting the East tower: at the same time there was something behind

them—not quite servility, but the smooth, professional respectfulness of the upper servant. Perhaps he is somebody's butler, thought Mr. Perry; but it's rather surprising that a butler should be going to Wonderland, and in those Throgmorton Street clothes; and one doesn't somehow associate butlers with cute blonde daughters. Still, there's no law of nature against butlers reproducing the species.

The train burst out into the dazzling sunlight again.

"You are to be with us for some time, sir?" inquired the man.

"A fortnight, probably. It depends——" Mr. Perry broke off, not wishing to say that it depended on how long his work would take. People did not normally go to Wonderland to work.

"In that case, if you will permit the liberty——"

Mr. Perry glanced at the visiting-card the man tendered him. "*Mr. James Thistlethwaite*, 29 *St. Petrock's Street, Oxford*," it stated non-committally.

"And this is Mrs. Thistlethwaite," the man continued, with the voice of a head verger pointing out the figures in a twelfth-century stained-glass window. "And my daughter, Sally."

Sally Thistlethwaite glanced up from a photograph of Robert Taylor, nodded coolly, and occupied herself with *Film Frolics* again. It was the kind of look Mr. Perry was quite used to getting from blondes in tobacco kiosks: a large Players and that will be all, it stated in unequivocal terms. But to-day, for no apparent reason, it irked him to be dismissed with one glance. He replied, more aggressively than was his habit:

"My dossier is as follows: Name, Paul Perry. Age, twenty-five. Unmarried. Educated, St. Bees, and Peterhouse, Cambridge."

Sally glanced up at him again, slightly puzzled. Her father, however, did not appear discomposed by Paul's

abruptness. He nodded benignly.

“A University man. Quite so. The stamp is unmistakable. Even at Cambridge. And your occupation, sir? No,” he wheezed, holding up a fat hand, “don’t tell me. Let me see, now.” He measured Paul with a grave, curiously alert eye.

“Mr. Thistlethwaite is a great judge of character,” said his wife comfortably. “You mustn’t mind him.”

“Grey flannel trousers, good quality cloth, not kept in a press, though, I fear. Shirt with collar attached. Sports jacket, ready-made,” murmured the fat man, as if communing with himself. Paul Perry blushed and, catching a subdued merriment in Sally’s eye, blushed more angrily still.

“The normal working attire of the schoolmaster,” continued Mr. Thistlethwaite. “But I observe the elbows are not unduly worn, though the jacket has seen considerable wear. No sitting at a desk, we may deduce: therefore not a schoolmaster. A journalist, perhaps. The pencils in the breast pocket. Bulge in right-hand side pocket. Might be a reporter’s note-book. I——”

“You’re embarrassing the gentleman, Daddy. Isn’t he, my pet?” exclaimed the girl Sally.

“Not in the least,” said Paul stiffly. “As it happens, I’m a scientist. A scientist of a sort, that is.”

“What sort. D’you carve up guinea-pigs, my pet?”

“Sally, you should not call strange gentlemen your pet in a railway carriage,” protested Mrs. Thistlethwaite unconvincingly. “Please forgive her, Mr. Er. She’s that impulsive.”

“Not at all,” Mr. Perry said. “I’m a field-worker, as a matter of fact.”

Sally opened her eyes wide. They were remarkably pretty eyes. “A field-worker,” she said. “Oo-er. Artificial manures, I suppose. Well, everyone to his taste.”

“Sally, that will be enough,” said Mr. Thistlethwaite. “The scientist is the benefactor of humanity. Several of my

gentlemen have chosen that walk of like. Artificial manures are of incalculable service to the agriculturist, and the land to-day is——”

“But I’ve nothing to do with artificial manures,” exclaimed Paul a little desperately. “Why you should think …” His voice tailed off, for he became aware of Mr. Thistlethwaite’s eye fixed, with a somewhat censorious expression, upon his neck.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Haven’t I washed my neck this morning?”

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised a shocked hand. “Please, sir. Please. No, I was referring to the lapel. Just a leetle too broad, wouldn’t you say, sir? A trifle outré? Where, if I may make so bold, did you purchase the garment?”

“In Cambridge. Why?”

“Ah, I thought so. Well, youth may perhaps be permitted a little excess, a certain rodomontade of attire, if I may so express myself. The garment does not become you ill, sir. Though, as I always tell my own gentlemen, a gentleman should wear a suit if he wishes to look distinguished in the quadrangle.”

“You’re connected with the university?” asked Paul, who had now decided that his vis-à-vis must be a college servant.

“We have that honour, sir. For the last hundred and fifty years we have had that honour.”

“Indeed? A hundred and fifty years? You’ll be thinking of retiring soon, I suppose?” replied Paul, bemused by the apparently royal use of the “we.”

“I allude to my firm,” said Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity.

Sally glanced up, giggling pleasantly. “Come off it, Daddy. Mr. Perry’s just itching to know what it’s all about. Daddy keeps a shop,” she exclaimed.

An expression of horror convulsed her father’s huge face at this meiosis. “A shop! My dear! Please! An

establishment."

"I've got it," said Paul. "You're a tailor."

"A master tailor," amended Mr. Thistlethwaite, recovering his poise. "Very sharp of you, sir. It is easy to see that you are a scientist. Observation and analysis. I myself, in my amateur way, am a dabbler in science. Criminology to be specific." He whipped out a luridly-covered book from behind his back. It was entitled *The Body in the Bassinet*. "A very pretty little problem. It was recommended to me by one of my late gentlemen—no less a person that Lord Hugh Willoughby."

"Good gracious, do you read that sort of stuff? Why?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite directed an overwhelming Johnsonian gaze upon Paul. "I read them, sir, because I take pleasure in them. Intellectual pleasure, sir."

"Mr. Perry's a high-brow, I expect," said Sally, very much up in arms. "Spends all his time reading about phosphates."

"My good girl," retorted Paul, "a high-brow is only a person with a heightened awareness of life. The infant, when he first uses his fingers to grasp an orange and transfer it to his mouth, is a high-brow. The——"

"Do we pay at the door, professor, or will you be sending round a plate?"

Paul gave her a look. It was no good, though; the young woman was quite impossible. Pert, semi-educated, low intelligence quotient. A type interesting enough objectively as a subject of research, but its individual members of no importance. Mr. Perry docketed her in his mind and pushed the file well out of sight, unaware that—like her father—Sally was no type, but a genuine original character. Indeed, Mr. Perry did not really hold with "characters"; they had a habit of upsetting both one's equanimity and one's statistics.

"This is your first visit to Wonderland?" Mr. Thistlethwaite was inquiring.

“Yes.”

“I hope it may come up to your expectations. Mrs. Thistlethwaite and I spent a very pleasant fortnight there last year. I myself,” he added coyly, “had the satisfaction of winning the Beetle Drive.”

“Indeed? You astonish me.”

“Every taste in recreation is catered for. You yourself, sir, are perhaps a cricketer?”

“No. No, I’m not.”

“Never mind,” Sally interposed darkly. “There’ll probably be a knock-knees competition.”

Paul turned, in a marked manner, to his *New Statesman*. After a while, the train was climbing and twisting through a landscape of small green hills, pastures and unkempt hedgerows. At the junction they got out and boarded another, smaller train, which puffed cheerfully towards Wonderland. Paul was thinking of the task ahead of him. If he carried it out successfully, the Chief might find him a permanent place in the organisation. But it was nearly all voluntary work, and the legacy his aunt had left him would not last much longer. He began to run over in his mind the system on which he would work: it depended in the last resort, of course, upon the local conditions, but there was no harm in having the general line of activity plotted out …

The train halted abruptly at a small station in a deep combe. They all got out. Mr. Thistlethwaite, taking Paul by the arm, led him aside and whispered coyly:

“If you will be so good, sir—do not mention the nature of my profession when we get there. I am holidaying incognito, so to say. In Wonderland we have no class distinctions, of course; but it will preclude any possibility of embarrassment on the part of some of our fellow-visitors, if they remain unaware of my—how shall I put it?—more fortunate social status. Let us enter as equals this true democracy of holiday-makers.”

The extraordinary man bowed gravely, removed a speck of fluff from Paul's collar, and waddled off towards the station yard, where a bright green bus, with *Wonderland* written on its side, awaited them. An attendant, dressed in bright green livery, was piling the luggage on top of the bus. Paul, who had lingered outside to study his fellow-visitors, finally entered the bus and secured the last available seat. At this moment, Sally Thistlethwaite walked down the gangway and stopped beside him.

"Rush hour," she said.

Paul indicated, with rather ill grace, that she could have his seat.

"I wouldn't disturb you for worlds," she said. Then, with a mischievous curl of her lip: "I'll sit on your lap, my pet."

"I would prefer to stand," retorted young Mr. Perry coldly.

"Oh, well, have it your own way. It's not every day you have a pretty girl asking to sit on your knee, though, I bet."

Paul moved forward, took up his stand where he could see ahead through the glass partition at the front of the bus. They careered along narrow lanes, past farms sheltered under the lee of the hills, then climbed a steep gradient till they attained a hilltop from which a great panorama of cliff and sea spread out. The line of cliffs, curving in from the distance, was golden from the evening sun: the inshore sea held the purple bloom of grapes. But it was not at sea or cliffs that young Mr. Perry was gazing with such satisfaction and excitement. His eyes were attracted by the huge white streamer, *Welcome to Wonderland*, that made an archway for the bus, and the spectacle of Wonderland itself displayed down there along the cliff-top between the hill and the sea.

II

THE CORE AND centre-piece of Wonderland was a huge white building, modernist in design, flat-roofed. Its walls seemed to be made of glass, so great was the extent of its windows, and this gave the severe lines a not ungraceful look of insubstantiality, as though at any moment it might open great white wings and float off into the summer blue. The side which faced the sea curved in a semi-circle, so that it commanded a wide prospect to south, west and east. A balcony overhung from the top storey on this side, curving like the bridge of a liner: it was, in fact, called "The Captain's Bridge" by the habitués of Wonderland.

Young Mr. Perry gazed his fill upon this edifice, and found it good. Good, not only for its hygienic-factory lines, but because of what it stood for. It stood for Organised Recreation, with the accent on the "organised": and anything that was efficiently organised was O.K. by Paul Perry. Within that massive fun-factory (so a careful study of the brochure issued by Wonderland Ltd. Holiday Camp had informed him) were vast dining-halls where ravenous visitors could partake of epicurean meals cooked by London chefs in hygienic kitchens and served on spotless napery by cheerful waitresses to the accompaniment of a string band: there was also a ballroom, whose sprung maple floor positively incited you to the light fantastic; to say nothing of bars, an indoor swimming-bath equipped with Aerofilter and coloured fountains, a concert hall, a gymnasium, and innumerable playrooms.

The general impression derived from this brochure was that, if you could not enjoy yourself at Wonderland, you were past praying for. And Wonderland was evidently determined to make you enjoy yourself there, even if you

had to perish from a surfeit of recreation in the process. As the bus drew to a standstill outside the main building, several men and women approached it, smiling hospitably but purposefully. The men wore green sweaters with a white letter W upon them, and white flannel trousers ; the women, green jerseys and short white skirts. In a moment each of the new batch of visitors had a numbered green disc pinned on him, and they were led off in groups to the chalets where they would be sleeping.

The Thistlethwaite family were evidently going to be near neighbours of Paul. As he trailed along behind them, he heard Sally say to her mother, in a voice—for her—strangely subdued.

“Did you see Rip Van Winkle up there?”

“Rip Van——? No, dear.”

“In that copse, beside the road, just before the bus turned into the grounds. He shook his fist at me. Darling, he really did look rather awful. Just his head was showing, above a bush. He had a long grey beard. I thought it was part of the bush at first.”

“What you need is a nice, hot drink, my love. Why, you’re trembling. You haven’t caught a chill, have you?”

“But, Mummy, I *saw* him. He seemed to be looking straight into my eyes as we passed by. And he shook his fist at me.”

“We must tell your father about it,” said Mrs. Thistlethwaite. “He’ll see that it doesn’t happen again. It was just a tramp, I expect.”

Paul Perry, who was looking with interest at the row of chalets, green-painted and pleasantly set amidst groups of trees, only gave half an ear to this conversation. He was to be reminded of it, however, before long, and in a disagreeable manner.

For the present, he was occupied by the sensation, part bewilderment, part timidity, which comes over any but the stoutest spirit when he is about to enter a community of

unknown people, himself unknown to them. It was like the first day at a public school, thought Paul. This impression was heightened by the athletic attire of the professional hosts and hostesses, and the groups of young people who were strolling about everywhere, laughing among themselves, so plainly knowing the ropes—five hundred of them the place could accommodate, for Wonderland was the biggest, brightest, most ambitious of all the holiday camps that had sprung up over England during the last year or two.

Paul closed the door of his chalet, and unpacked with the forlorn gloom of a new boy on the first day of term arranging his few possessions in his locker. The luxuriant Sleepeesi mattress wooing the tired reveller into the arms of Morpheus, the water (H. and C.), the electric light, hanging wardrobe and 100% damp-proof walls—all extolled in the Wonderland Ltd. brochure—failed to drive away Paul's blues. Luxury, indeed, though he approved of it on principle provided it was put within the reach of the masses, had a certain disquieting effect upon him. He was not for nothing the son of an Evangelical minister, brought up in a harsh, poverty-stricken north-country town.

"Mr. Perry? Good. Settling in all right?"

The young man who had knocked at the chalet door was tall broad, and tanned a gorgeous mahogany, like an advertisement out of *Esquire*.

"I'm the games organiser," he added. "Name of Wise. My step-brother's the resident manager."

"Edward Wise? The rugger blue?"

"Yes. I used to play a bit," said the gorgeous young man, with what seemed to Paul the most offensive false modesty.

"You were up at Cambridge just before me, then. And your brother's the manager? All one big, happy family here."

"We aim to give you a home from home, set in sylvan surroundings beside the sparkling waves. See our

brochure.”

“You’ve certainly got a nice little place here.”

“Not too dusty. Well, I suppose you’ll be clocking in at the Reception. Eight pip-emma. Hallo,” said Mr. Wise, noticing Paul’s note-books which were piled on the chest of drawers. “You an author? I say, not so bad. Never met a live author before. Down here for local colour?”

“Something of the sort,” replied Paul mendaciously. He was not unmoved by the evident respect which had come into the athlete’s voice. His pleasure was short-lived. Edward Wise, who had moved to the door, exclaimed:

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! If it isn’t our Sal! Back amongst the hectic pleasure-seekers again, Sally?”

“How are you, Teddy?”

“Full of oats, midear, full of oats. I say, you’re in distinguished company. Celebrated author in our midst. Name of Perry. You’ll have to watch your step, midear.”

“Perry?” Paul could hear her saying. “But that’s the man we travelled down on the train with. He said he was a scientist.”

“Ah. Pulling your leg. Mystery man.”

“Well, I don’t know. He’s a high-brow, anyway——”

“Moderate the voice, Sally. The gentleman’s just down this street.”

“I say, Teddy, talking of mystery men, have you seen an old guy with a beard a mile long in the wood up there?”

“Beard? Oh, that must be old Ishmael. Sort of hermit idea. Quite harmless, but he doesn’t like us very much. Wasn’t in residence last time you came, I believe. He——”

Paul could not follow the rest of this interesting conversation, for the two moved away out of earshot. The girl had quite a pleasing voice, he reflected: deep, liquid, faintly countrified in accent. Pity she had nothing in her head. Edward Wise he dismissed as the normal, hearty type: common as blackberries at Cambridge: potentially, no doubt, the Enemy—but with a little diplomacy you could get

them eating out of your hand. He wondered what Wise did in the winter months when the camp was closed, and jotted down a memo. in the note-book marked Q (for Queries).

Presently, taking off his tie and turning his shirt-collar down over his coat ("protective colouring" was the way he put it to himself), Paul wandered out to take the air before dinner. A huge figure, resplendent in white drill suit, Panama hat, and what appeared to be an M.C.C. tie, bore down upon him.

"Salubrious air, sir," boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite. "Putting colour in those cheeks already. May we have the honour of including you at our table, sir? Very congenial company you will find it, I venture to say. Interesting material, too, for a gentleman of the pen. Ah, yes," he continued, silencing Paul's protest with a roguish finger. "My daughter told me. Have no fear, sir. Like myself, you prefer to be incognito. Very natural. Very proper. A chiel amang us taking notes."

Paul had no very keen desire for Mr. Thistlethwaite as a permanent mess-mate during his stay at Wonderland: but the prospect of sitting down to table with a number of total strangers, though professionally suitable enough, intimidated him more than he would have cared to say. Paul Perry was still pretty new to his job. So he accepted Mr. Thistlethwaite's offer, and together they strolled towards the great white building from which the sound of a deep gong reverberated.

"'The clamorous harbinger of victuals,'" quoted Mr. Thistlethwaite. "You will find the table modest, sir, but not unpalatable. They keep a very tolerable cellar. I fancy we might broach a bottle to launch our—ah—pleasure cruise…."

"I can't think how they do it on £3 10s. a week," Paul was saying twenty minutes later to his left-hand neighbour, a small, tubby, beaming man with gold-rimmed pince-nez.

They had eaten through two excellent courses, and there was still Crême brulé, cheese and coffee to come.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" replied the small man. "Organisation, of course. Mind you, they put on specially good grub for the Saturday dinner, because newcomers generally turn up to-day. But £3 10s. inclusive of everything—all the fun of the fair, as you might say—that's good going." He blinked rapidly several times, then murmured to Paul out of the corner of his mouth, with an absurd air of self-importance, "Shouldn't be surprised if they aren't losing money over it. I'm told they're out to knock out Beale Bay—that's the holiday camp farther down the coast. Competition's pretty fierce, you can bet. If we saw the balance sheet, we'd find the Wonderland people had cut profits down to the bone, anyway."

"Well, that's their look-out, isn't it? Lowers the cost of luxury for us poor holiday-makers, so we won't complain."

"What? Yes, oh yes, I see what you mean," said the small man. He had an anxious way of listening to you, Paul noticed—head slightly on one side, eyes peering up through the pince-nez—as though what you said might contain some clue that would turn out a matter of life and death for him.

"Mind you," he went on, lowering his voice again, "the cheap tariff here—well, it means that you get rather a mixed crowd. At Bognor, now——"

"Sir," interrupted Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had overheard this sentiment, "do you suggest that the amenities of civilisation should not be open to all alike, from the highest in the land to the humblest?"

"Oh, indeed no, I certainly didn't. I——"

"You will concur with me, as a" —here Mr. Thistlethwaite winked ponderously at Paul—"as a scientist, Mr. Perry, that science should benefit all equally."

"It would be nice if it did."

"Quite so. Your sentiments, Mr. Morley, were illiberal, to say the least."

“Now, Daddy, you mustn’t bully Albert,” said Sally. “Albert, my pet, don’t listen to him. He’s just practising speeches for when he’s a town councillor.”

Albert Morley gave Sally a look of almost dog-like gratitude. She smiled back at him kindly. She had dark eyebrows and eyelashes, Paul noticed for the first time: they gave a certain vivacity, he admitted, to a blonde type which would otherwise be quite conventional and insipid. Catching his glance, she said to him coolly:

“*As a scientist*, Mr. Perry, you must think us a very low-brow, dull lot here. Funny place for *you* to come for a holiday.”

“A scientist is always on the look-out for specimens,” Paul replied, giving back her haughty gaze with interest. If she was determined to make unprovoked war on him, war she should have.

“The back-chat king,” said Sally, turning her shoulder upon him.

Paul looked round the tables at what Mr. Morley had called “a mixed crowd.” Young people, for the most part. From the £150 to the £300 income groups, he imagined: that could be verified later by taking a cross-section. Quite a number of older men and women, though: brought their children, no doubt: the children had a special supper at 6. Many of the girls wore evening frocks, in readiness for the dancing. Flannel suits predominated among the males: the faces, like the suits, were spruce, showy, cut to a pattern. There was no doubt that the visitors were enjoying themselves: far more animation than you would get at a seaside boarding-house, thought Paul, remembering with a shudder those boyhood holidays in grim *pensions* at Scarborough or Skegness.

Two sides of this restaurant were occupied by glass windows almost from floor to ceiling: the other walls looked like unstained oak, but were probably faked pitch-pine. The chairs were imitation Spanish style, quite well padded.

Flowers and electric-light standards decorated the tables, which seated anything from two to a dozen people. Some of the visitors, Paul noticed, seemed a little subdued by the unusual luxury of their surroundings: these, no doubt, were new arrivals who had never been to such a camp before. On the whole, though, it was evident that they took to what Mr. Thistlethwaite called “the amenities of civilisation” like ducks to water. He wanted to ask someone whether this short, annual brush with “the amenities” dissatisfied people with the drabness of their own homes; but he feared lest the question might bring down on his head some crushing, Johnsonian rebuke from Mr. Thistlethwaite who, under the influence of good wine and the holiday spirit, was growing more democratic every minute.

Yes, the Wonderland Thistlethwaite was noticeably different from the fellow-traveller of a few hours ago, just as that fellow-traveller no doubt differed markedly from the tailor of Oxford. Environment conditions personality, said Paul Perry to himself: like many of his age, he had a weakness for generalisations with a scientific smack about them.

After dinner was over, Mr. Thistlethwaite suggested that they should take the air on “the Captain’s bridge” until it was time to enter the concert hall for the Reception ceremony. Albert Morley trotted upstairs in their wake. It was he who pointed out to Paul the sights that could be seen from the balcony, which indeed commanded a superb prospect of the sea and of the coast to east and west. With a proprietary, but faintly anxious pride, as of a father introducing his children to a rich, capricious relative, Mr. Morley called Paul’s attention to the sunset, a passing freighter, an old smugglers’ cove, the section of cliff that concealed the naval port of Applestock—their nearest town.

“I wanted to join the navy myself, when I was a nipper: but my eyesight——” said Mr. Morley, peering up into Paul’s face. “I remember my dad taking me on a steamer

down the Thames. It was the August Bank Holiday of 1913—or was it 1912?—I can't remember now. We passed the warehouses, down Limehouse way, and he told me—my dad was in the coastal trade, you see—that in the old days you could smell the spices in the warehouses right across the river. From the East, they brought them. I fancied to myself I could smell them even then. Of course, I'd wanted to be a sailor long before that, but it brought it home, somehow. I went into a shipping office. It was the next best thing, if you take my meaning."

Mr. Morley broke off, blushing a little. Oh, hell, thought Paul. Am I going to have this little bore attached to me for the duration? He was embarrassed by this disclosure of Albert Morley's fantasy-life, and ashamed of his embarrassment.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to a section of the balcony that was shut off from the rest by a glass partition.

"That's Captain Wise's private end of the bridge. Captain Mortimer Wise. He's the resident manager. You'll be seeing him shortly in the concert hall, when he receives the guests. A very pleasant-spoken gentleman. Wonderful organiser."

The resident manager. I could get a good deal of the information I want from him, thought Paul: if he's not too busy. Should I take him into my confidence at the start? Better wait and see what he's like.

"Time to be going below," said Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had been standing a little apart from them on the bridge, breathing stertorously, and waving his arms in strange gestures like a lunatic signaller. "The ozone here, sir, is incomparable," he explained. "'Mens sana in corpore sano,' as the Latin poet has it."

The concert hall was already, almost full. Although this was ostensibly a reception for the new-comers, everyone was going—as Edward Wise had phrased it—to clock in. The Wonderlanders were evidently a gregarious lot. This

pleased Paul, who on principle approved of mass movements, and could quote chapter and verse from certain modern authors to condemn the detached, the solitary, the bird-watcher, the secret vice of romantic isolation.

"Holds five hundred, this hall does," whispered Albert Morley with timid pride. "You wait till the fun starts. That young Mr. Wise—he's a card."

Paul began to feel a trifle apprehensive. Wait till the fun starts. It sounded ominously like the initiation ceremony of a savage tribe. Not that one didn't approve of Malinowski, and all that.

The green-and-white-clad officials of the camp now filed on to the platform amid applause, and took their seats on a crescent of chairs. The staff at prize-giving, talking among themselves, elaborately unconscious of those in the body of the hall. Now it's the cue for the headmaster to appear. Louder applause. Captain Wise, carrying a sheaf of papers, came to the front of the platform. Considerably older than his step-brother. Smaller. The same square shape of head. The professional look, worried but infinitely capable, of the organiser. No nonsense about him.

"I won't keep you long," he said. "We welcome you to Wonderland. We hope you'll all have a good time. My assistants and I are here to make sure that you have it. You'll find a time-table of the week's activities on the notice board in the entrance hall. I'm sure you'll all find something to your taste there. But don't think you've got to go in for any of these competitions and things if you don't want to. We have no compulsory games at Wonderland." (Mild applause: the public school reference is slightly above their heads, thought Paul.)

"We try to have a minimum of rules. We rely on your cooperation, and you've never let us down. The chief of them is, no noise in the camp after 1 a.m. The ladies need their beauty sleep." (Laughter and protests.) "And, of

course, no rowdiness. Our expert gang of chuckers-out——” (Captain Wise indicated the row of officials behind him: cheers and laughter: he’s a good psychologist, thought Paul—knows how to jolly them along, without being false-hearty.) “If you’ve any complaints, great or small, any suggestions for improving the place, bring ’em to me or one of the staff. We’re always on tap. And don’t forget to book early for next year’s visit: we’ve had to turn away over two hundred applications this summer. Well, I’ll hand you over now to the tender mercies of the games organiser. Teddy, step forward. Cheerio, everybody.”

Edward Wise took the floor. There was a perceptible stir among the female section of the audience.

“Hi-ya, boys and girls,” he cried.

“Hi-ya, Teddy,” the cry went back.

“Before we have a spot of community singing, let’s loosen up on the old war-cry. Won-der-land, hi-yi-yi. Gently at first. Gently does it. Let her go.”

The war-cry was repeated twenty times, each syllable strongly stressed, in a whisper at first, then louder and faster till it reached the hysterical pitch of the Sieg Heils at a Nazi congress.

Paul Perry was both fascinated and horrified. His fastidious soul was intensely embarrassed by the proceedings. The synthetic American accent, like a dance-band leader’s, which had replaced Edward Wise’s normal tones, the slick, confident gestures with which he conducted the war-cry—these were vastly repugnant to Paul. But, as a dispassionate observer, he could not fail to be interested; while, as one who approved of mass production on principle, he had to approve this curious, machine-like production of mass sound. And not mass sound only. Mass emotion was being stirred, the Wonderland visitors were being welded into a Wonderland community—a great pleasure-unit with a single voice. Mr. Thistlethwaite, bellowing rhythmically at his side, no longer