

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Berlin Novels

Christopher Isherwood

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Dedication

A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)

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On Reugen Island (Summer 1931)

The Nowaks

The Landauers

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## About the Book

*Mr Norris Changes Trains* is the first of Christopher Isherwood's classic 'Berlin' novels. The book charts the encounter and growing friendship between the young William Bradshaw and the urbane and mildly sinister Mr Norris. Piquant, witty and oblique, it vividly evokes the atmosphere of pre-war Berlin.

*Goodbye to Berlin* was the inspiration for *Cabaret* and is an unforgettable portrait of bohemian Berlin. Isherwood shows the lives of people at threat from the rise of the Nazis and creates a haunting evocation of a city, and a world, on the very brink of ruin.

## About the Author

Christopher Isherwood was born in Cheshire in 1904. He began to write at university and later moved to Berlin, where he gave English lessons to support himself. He witnessed Hitler's rise to power first hand and some of his best works, such as *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, draw on these experiences. Isherwood travelled with W.H. Auden to China in the late 1930s before going to America in 1939 which he made his home for the rest of his life. He died on 4 January 1986.

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

*All the Conspirators*

*The Memorial*

*Lions and Shadows*

*Prater Violet*

*The Condor and the Cows*

*The World in the Evening*

*Down There on a Visit*

*Ramakrishna and His Disciples*

*A Meeting by the River*

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*A Single Man*

With Don Bachardy

*October*

With W. H. Auden

*The Dog Beneath the Skin*

*The Ascent of F6*

*On the Frontier*

*Journey to a War*

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

# The Berlin Novels

VINTAGE BOOKS  
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## MR NORRIS CHANGES TRAINS



TO W. H. AUDEN

## CHAPTER ONE

MY FIRST IMPRESSION was that the stranger's eyes were of an unusually light blue. They met mine for several blank seconds, vacant, unmistakably scared. Startled and innocently naughty, they half reminded me of an incident I couldn't quite place; something which had happened a long time ago, to do with the upper fourth form classroom. They were the eyes of a schoolboy surprised in the act of breaking one of the rules. Not that I had caught him, apparently, at anything except his own thoughts: perhaps he imagined I could read them. At any rate, he seemed not to have heard or seen me cross the compartment from my corner to his own, for he started violently at the sound of my voice; so violently, indeed, that his nervous recoil hit me like repercussion. Instinctively I took a pace backwards.

It was exactly as though we had collided with each other bodily in the street. We were both confused, both ready to be apologetic. Smiling, anxious to reassure him, I repeated my question:

'I wonder, sir, if you could let me have a match?'

Even now, he didn't answer at once. He appeared to be engaged in some sort of rapid mental calculation, while his fingers, nervously active, sketched a number of flurried gestures round his waistcoat. For all they conveyed, he might equally have been going to undress, to draw a revolver, or merely to make sure that I hadn't stolen his money. Then the moment of agitation passed from his gaze like a little cloud, leaving a clear blue sky. At last he had understood what it was that I wanted:

'Yes, yes. Er - certainly. Of course.'

As he spoke he touched his left temple delicately with his finger-tips, coughed, and suddenly smiled. His smile had great charm. It disclosed the ugliest teeth I had ever seen. They were like broken rocks.

‘Certainly,’ he repeated. ‘With pleasure.’

Delicately, with finger and thumb, he fished in the waistcoat pocket of his expensive-looking soft grey suit, extracted a gold spirit-lighter. His hands were white, small, and beautifully manicured.

I offered him my cigarettes.

‘Er – thank you. Thank you.’

‘After you, sir.’

‘No, no. Please.’

The tiny flame of the lighter flickered between us, as perishable as the atmosphere which our exaggerated politeness had created. The merest breath would have extinguished the one, the least incautious gesture or word would have destroyed the other. The cigarettes were both lighted now. We sat back in our respective places. The stranger was still doubtful of me. He was wondering whether he hadn’t gone too far, delivered himself to a bore or a crook. His timid soul was eager to retire. I, on my side, had nothing to read. I foresaw a journey of utter silence, lasting seven or eight hours. I was determined to talk.

‘Do you know what time we arrive at the frontier?’

Looking back on the conversation, this question does not seem to me to have been particularly unusual. It is true that I had no interest in the answer; I wanted merely to ask something which might start us chatting, and which wasn’t, at the same time, inquisitive or impertinent. Its effect on the stranger was remarkable. I had certainly succeeded in arousing his interest. He gave me a long, odd glance, and his features seemed to stiffen a little. It was the glance of a poker-player who guesses suddenly that his opponent holds a straight flush and that he had better be careful. At length he answered, speaking slowly and with caution:

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you exactly. In about an hour’s time, I believe.’

His glance, now vacant for a moment, was clouded again. An unpleasant thought seemed to tease him like a wasp; he moved his head slightly to avoid it. Then he added, with surprising petulance:

‘All these frontiers . . . such a horrible nuisance.’

I wasn’t quite sure how to take this. The thought crossed my mind that he was perhaps some kind of mild internationalist; a member of the League of Nations Union. I ventured encouragingly:

‘They ought to be done away with.’

‘I quite agree with you. They ought, indeed.’

There was no mistaking his warmth. He had a large blunt fleshy nose and a chin which seemed to have slipped sideways. It was like a broken concertina. When he spoke, it jerked crooked in the most curious fashion and a deep cleft dimple like a wound surprisingly appeared in the side of it. Above his ripe red cheeks, his forehead was sculpturally white, like marble. A queerly cut fringe of dark grey hair lay across it, compact, thick, and heavy. After a moment’s examination, I realized, with extreme interest, that he was wearing a wig.

‘Particularly,’ I followed up my success, ‘all these red-tape formalities; the passport examination, and so forth.’

But now. This wasn’t right. I saw at once from his expression that I’d somehow managed to strike a new, disturbing note. We were speaking similar but distinct languages. This time, however, the stranger’s reaction was not mistrust. He asked, with a puzzling air of frankness and unconcealed curiosity:

‘Have you ever had trouble here yourself?’

It wasn’t so much the question which I found odd, as the tone in which he asked it. I smiled to hide my mystification.

‘Oh, no. Quite the reverse. Often they don’t bother to open anything; and as for your passport, they hardly look at

it.'

'I'm so glad to hear you say that.'

He must have seen from my face what I was thinking, for he added hastily: 'It may seem absurd, but I do so hate being fussed and bothered.'

'Of course. I quite understand.'

I grinned, for I had just arrived at a satisfactory explanation of his behaviour. The old boy was engaged in a little innocent private smuggling. Probably a piece of silk for his wife or a box of cigars for a friend. And now, of course, he was beginning to feel scared. Certainly he looked prosperous enough to pay any amount of duty. The rich have strange pleasures.

'You haven't crossed this frontier before, then?' I felt kindly and protective and superior. I would cheer him up, and, if things came to the worst, prompt him with some plausible lie to soften the heart of the customs officer.

'Of recent years, no. I usually travel by Belgium. For a variety of reasons. Yes.' Again he looked vague, paused, and solemnly scratched his chin. All at once, something seemed to rouse him to awareness of my presence: 'Perhaps, at this stage in the proceedings, I ought to introduce myself. Arthur Norris, Gent. Or shall we say: Of independent means?' He tittered nervously, exclaimed in alarm: 'Don't get up, I beg.'

It was too far to shake hands without moving. We compromised by a polite seated bow from the waist.

'My name's William Bradshaw,' I said.

'Dear me, you're not by any chance one of the Suffolk Bradshaws?'

'I suppose I am. Before the War we used to live near Ipswich.'

'Did you really, now? I used at one time to go and stay with a Mrs Hope-Lucas. She had a lovely place near Matlock. She was a Miss Bradshaw before her marriage.'

'Yes, that's right. She was my great-aunt Agnes. She died about seven years ago.'

‘Did she? Dear, dear. I’m very sorry to hear that. . . . Of course, I knew her when I was quite a young man; and she was a middle-aged lady then. I’m speaking now, mind you, of ‘ninety-eight.’

All this time I was covertly studying his wig. I had never seen one so cleverly made before. At the back of the skull, where it was brushed in with his own hair, it was wonderfully matched. Only the parting betrayed it at once, and even this would have passed muster at the distance of three or four yards.

‘Well, well,’ observed Mr Norris. ‘Dear me, what a very small place the world is.’

‘You never met my mother, I suppose? Or my uncle, the admiral?’

I was quite resigned, now, to playing the relationships game. It was boring but exacting, and could be continued for hours. Already I saw a whole chain of easy moves ahead of me – uncles, aunts, cousins, their marriages and their properties, death duties, mortgages, sales. Then on to public school and university, comparing notes on food, exchanging anecdotes about masters, famous matches, and celebrated rows. I knew the exact tone to adopt.

But, to my surprise, Mr Norris didn’t seem to want to play this game after all. He answered hurriedly:

‘I’m afraid not. No. Since the War, I’ve rather lost touch with my English friends. My affairs have taken me abroad a good deal.’

The word ‘abroad’ caused both of us naturally to look out of the window. Holland was slipping past our viewpoint with the smooth somnolence of an after-dinner dream: a placid swampy landscape bounded by an electric tram travelling along the wall of a dike.

‘Do you know this country well?’ I asked. Since I had noticed the wig, I found myself somehow unable to go on calling him sir. And, anyhow, if he wore it to make himself

look younger, it was both tactless and unkind to insist thus upon the difference between our ages.

‘I know Amsterdam pretty well.’ Mr Norris rubbed his chin with a nervous, furtive movement. He had a trick of doing this and of opening his mouth in a kind of snarling grimace quite without ferocity, like an old lion in a cage. ‘Pretty well, yes.’

‘I should like to go there very much. It must be so quiet and peaceful.’

‘On the contrary, I can assure you that it’s one of the most dangerous cities in Europe.’

‘Indeed?’

‘Yes. Deeply attached as I am to Amsterdam, I shall always maintain that it has three fatal drawbacks. In the first place, the stairs are so steep in many of the houses that it requires a professional mountaineer to ascend them without risking heart failure or a broken neck. Secondly, there are the cyclists. They positively overrun the town, and appear to make it a point of honour to ride without the faintest consideration for human life. I had an exceedingly narrow escape only this morning. And, thirdly, there are the canals. In summer, you know . . . most insanitary. Oh, most insanitary. I can’t tell you what I’ve suffered. For weeks on end I was never without a sore throat.’

By the time we had reached Bentheim, Mr Norris had delivered a lecture on the disadvantages of most of the chief European cities. I was astonished to find how much he had travelled. He had suffered from rheumatics in Stockholm and draughts in Kaunas; in Riga he had been bored, in Warsaw treated with extreme discourtesy, in Belgrade he had been unable to obtain his favourite brand of toothpaste. In Rome he had been annoyed by insects, in Madrid by beggars, in Marseilles by taxi-horns. In Bucharest he had had an exceedingly unpleasant experience with a water-closet. Constantinople he had found expensive and

lacking in taste. The only two cities of which he greatly approved were Paris and Athens. Athens particularly. Athens was his spiritual home.

By now the train had stopped. Pale stout men in blue uniforms strolled up and down the platform with that faintly sinister air of leisure which invests the movements of officials at frontier stations. They were not unlike prison warders. It was as if we might none of us be allowed to travel any farther. Far down the corridor of the coach a voice echoed: '*Deutsche Passkontrolle.*'

'I think,' said Mr Norris, smiling urbanely at me, 'that one of my pleasant memories is of the mornings I used to spend pottering about those quaint old streets behind the Temple of Theseus.'

He was extremely nervous. His delicate white hand fiddled incessantly with the signet ring on his little finger; his uneasy blue eyes kept squinting rapid glances into the corridor. His voice rang false; high-pitched in archly forced gaiety, it resembled the voice of a character in a pre-war drawing-room comedy. He spoke so loudly that the people in the next compartment must certainly be able to hear him.

'One comes, quite unexpectedly, upon the most fascinating little corners. A single column standing in the middle of a rubbish-heap . . .'

'*Deutsche Passkontrolle.* All passports, please.'

An official had appeared in the doorway of our compartment. His voice made Mr Norris give a slight but visible jump. Anxious to allow him time to pull himself together, I hastily offered my own passport. As I had expected, it was barely glanced at.

'I am travelling to Berlin,' said Mr Norris, handing over his passport with a charming smile; so charming, indeed, that it seemed a little overdone. The official did not react. He merely grunted, turned over the pages with considerable interest, and then, taking the passport out into the corridor, held it up to the light of the window.



‘It’s a remarkable fact,’ said Mr Norris, conversationally, to me, ‘that nowhere in classical literature will you find any reference to the Lycabettos Hill.’

I was amazed to see what a state he was in; his fingers twitched and his voice was scarcely under control. There were actually beads of sweat on his alabaster forehead. If this was what he called ‘being fussed’, if these were the agonies he suffered whenever he broke a by-law, it was no wonder that his nerves had turned him prematurely bald. He shot an instant’s glance of acute misery into the corridor. Another official had arrived. They were examining the passport together, with their backs turned towards us. By what was obviously an heroic effort Mr Norris managed to maintain his chattily informative tone.

‘So far as we know, it appears to have been overrun with wolves.’

The other official had got the passport now. He looked as though he was going to take it away with him. His colleague was referring to a small black shiny notebook. Raising his head, he asked abruptly:

‘You are at present residing at Courbierestrasse 168?’

For a moment I thought Mr Norris was going to faint.

‘Er – yes . . . I am. . . .’

Like a bird with a cobra, his eyes were fastened upon his interrogator in helpless fascination. One might have supposed that he expected to be arrested on the spot. Actually, all that happened was that the official made a note in his book, grunted again, and turning on his heel went on to the next compartment. His colleague handed the passport back to Mr Norris and said: ‘Thank you, sir’, saluted politely and followed him.

Mr Norris sank back against the hard wooden seat with a deep sigh. For a moment he seemed incapable of speech. Taking out a big white silk handkerchief, he began to dab at his forehead, being careful not to disarrange his wig.

‘I wonder if you’d be so very kind as to open the window,’ he said at length in a faint voice. ‘It seems to have got dreadfully stuffy in here all of a sudden.’

I hastened to do so.

‘Is there anything I can fetch you?’ I asked. ‘A glass of water?’

He feebly waved the offer aside. ‘Most good of you . . . No. I shall be all right in a moment. My heart isn’t quite what it was.’ He sighed: ‘I’m getting too old for this sort of thing. All this travelling . . . very bad for me.’

‘You know, you really shouldn’t upset yourself so.’ I felt more than ever protective towards him at that moment. This affectionate protectiveness, which he so easily and dangerously inspired in me, was to colour all our future dealings. ‘You let yourself be annoyed by trifles.’

‘You call that a trifle!’ he exclaimed in rather pathetic protest.

‘Of course. It was bound to have been put right in a few minutes, anyhow. The man simply mistook you for somebody else of the same name.’

‘You really think so?’ He was childishly eager to be reassured.

‘What other possible explanation is there?’

Mr Norris didn’t seem so certain of this. He said dubiously: ‘Well – er – none, I suppose.’

‘Besides, it often happens, you know. The most innocent people get mistaken for famous jewel thieves. They undress them and search them all over. Fancy if they’d done that to you!’

‘Really!’ Mr Norris giggled. ‘The mere thought brings a blush to my modest cheek.’

We both laughed. I was glad that I had managed to cheer him up so successfully. But what on earth, I wondered, would happen when the customs examiner arrived? For this, if I was right about the smuggled presents, was the real cause of all his nervousness. If the little misunderstanding

about the passport had upset him so much, the customs officer would most certainly give him a heart attack. I wondered if I hadn't better mention this straight out and offer to hide the things in my own suit-case; but he seemed so blissfully unconscious of any approaching trouble that I hadn't the heart to disturb him.

I was quite wrong. The customs examination, when it came, seemed positively to give Norris pleasure. He showed not the slightest signs of uneasiness; nor was anything dutiable discovered in his luggage. In fluent German he laughed and joked with the official over a large bottle of Coty perfume: 'Oh, yes, it's for my personal use, I can assure you. I wouldn't part with it for the world. Do let me give you a drop on your handkerchief. It's so deliciously refreshing.'

At length it was all over. The train cranked slowly forward into Germany. The dining-car attendant came down the corridor, sounding his little gong.

'And now, my dear boy,' said Mr Norris, 'after these alarms and excursions and your most valuable moral support, for which I'm more grateful than I can tell you, I hope you'll do me the honour of being my guest at lunch.'

I thanked him and said that I should be delighted.

When we were seated comfortably in the restaurant-car, Mr Norris ordered a small cognac:

'I have made it a general rule never to drink before meals, but there are times when the occasion seems to demand it.'

The soup was served. He took one spoonful, then called the attendant and addressed him in a tone of mild reproach.

'Surely you'll agree that there's too much onion?' he asked anxiously. 'Will you do me a personal favour? I should like you to taste it for yourself.'

'Yes, sir,' said the attendant, who was extremely busy, and whisked away the plate with faintly insolent deference. Mr Norris was pained.

‘Did you see that? He wouldn’t taste it. He wouldn’t admit there was anything wrong. Dear me, how very obstinate some people are!’

He forgot this little disappointment in human nature within a few moments, however. He had begun to study the wine list with great care.

‘Let me see . . . Let me see . . . Would you be prepared to contemplate a hock? You would? It’s a lottery, mind you. On a train one must always be prepared for the worst. I think we’ll risk it, shall we?’

The hock arrived and was a success. Mr Norris had not tasted such good hock, he told me, since his lunch with the Swedish Ambassador in Vienna last year. And there were kidneys, his favourite dish. ‘Dear me,’ he remarked with pleasure, ‘I find I’ve got quite an appetite. . . . If you want to get kidneys perfectly cooked you should go to Budapest. It was a revelation to me. . . . I must say these are really delicious, don’t you agree? Really quite delicious. At first I thought I tasted that odious red pepper, but it was merely my overwrought imagination.’ He called the attendant: ‘Will you please give the chef my compliments and say that I should like to congratulate him on a most excellent lunch? Thank you. And now bring me a cigar.’ Cigars were brought, sniffed at, weighed between the finger and thumb. Mr Norris finally selected the largest on the tray: ‘What, my dear boy, you don’t smoke them? Oh, but you should. Well, well, perhaps you have other vices?’

By this time he was in the best of spirits.

‘I must say the older I get the more I come to value the little comforts of this life. As a general rule, I make a point of travelling first class. It always pays. One gets treated with so much more consideration. Take today, for instance. If I hadn’t been in a third-class compartment, they’d never have dreamed of bothering me. There you have the German official all over. “A race of non-commissioned officers,”

didn't somebody call them? How very good that is! How true. . . .'

Mr Norris picked his teeth for a few moments in thoughtful silence.

'My generation was brought up to regard luxury from an aesthetic standpoint. Since the War, people don't seem to feel that any more. Too often they are merely gross. They take their pleasures coarsely, don't you find? At times, one feels guilty, oneself, with so much unemployment and distress everywhere. The conditions in Berlin are very bad. Oh, very bad . . . as no doubt you yourself know. In my small way I do what I can to help, but it's such a drop in the ocean.' Mr Norris sighed and touched his napkin with his lips.

'And here we are, riding in the lap of luxury. The social reformers would condemn us, no doubt. All the same, I suppose if somebody didn't use this dining-car, we should have all these employees on the dole as well. . . . Dear me, dear me. Things are so very complex nowadays.'

We parted at the Zoo Station. Mr Norris held my hand for a long time amidst the jostle of arriving passengers.

'*Auf Wiedersehen*, my dear boy. *Auf Wiedersehen*. I won't say goodbye because I hope that we shall be seeing each other in the very near future. Any little discomforts I may have suffered on that odious journey have been amply repaid by the great pleasure of making your acquaintance. And now I wonder if you'd care to have tea with me at my flat one day this week? Shall we make it Saturday? Here's my card. Do please say you'll come.'

I promised that I would.

## CHAPTER TWO

MR NORRIS HAD two front doors to his flat. They stood side by side. Both had little round peep-holes in the centre panel and brightly polished knobs and brass nameplates. On the left-hand plate was engraved: *Arthur Norris. Private.* And on the right hand: *Arthur Norris. Export and Import.*

After a moment's hesitation, I pressed the button of the left-hand bell. The bell was startlingly loud; it must have been clearly audible all over the flat. Nevertheless, nothing happened. No sound came from within. I was just about to ring again when I became aware that an eye was regarding me through the peep-hole in the door. How long it had been there, I didn't know. I felt embarrassed and uncertain whether to stare the eye out of its hole or merely pretend that I hadn't seen it. Ostentatiously, I examined the ceiling, the floor, the walls; then ventured a furtive glance to make sure that it had gone. It hadn't. Vexed, I turned my back on the door altogether. Nearly a minute passed.

When, finally, I did turn round it was because the other door, the Export and Import door, had opened. A young man stood on the threshold.

'Is Mr Norris in?' I asked.

The young man eyed me suspiciously. He had watery light yellow eyes and a blotched complexion the colour of porridge. His head was huge and round, set awkwardly on a short plump body. He wore a smart lounge suit and patent-leather shoes. I didn't like the look of him at all.

'Have you an appointment?'

'Yes.' My tone was extremely curt.

At once, the young man's face curved into oily smiles. 'Oh, it's Mr Bradshaw? One moment, if you please.'

And, to my astonishment, he closed the door in my face, only to reappear an instant later at the left-hand door, standing aside for me to enter the flat. This behaviour seemed all the more extraordinary because, as I noticed immediately I was inside, the Private side of the entrance hall was divided from the Export side only by a thick hanging curtain.

‘Mr Norris wished me to say that he will be with you in one moment,’ said the big-headed young man, treading delicately across the thick carpet on the toes of his patent-leather shoes. He spoke very softly, as if he were afraid of being overheard. Opening the door of a large sitting-room, he silently motioned me to take a chair and withdrew.

Left alone, I looked around me, slightly mystified. Everything was in good taste, the furniture, the carpet, the colour scheme. But the room was curiously without character. It was like a room on the stage or in the window of a high-class furnishing store; elegant, expensive, discreet. I had expected Mr Norris’s background to be altogether more exotic; something Chinese would have suited him, with golden and scarlet dragons.

The young man had left the door ajar. From somewhere just outside I heard him say, presumably into a telephone: ‘The gentleman is here, sir.’ And now, with even greater distinctness, Mr Norris’s voice was audible as he replied, from behind a door in the opposite wall of the sitting-room: ‘Oh, is he? Thank you.’

I wanted to laugh. This little comedy was so unnecessary as to seem slightly sinister. A moment later Mr Norris himself came into the room, nervously rubbing his manicured hands together.

‘My dear boy, this is indeed an honour! Delighted to welcome you under the shadow of my humble roof-tree.’

He didn’t look well, I thought. His face wasn’t so rosy today, and there were rings under his eyes. He sat down for a moment in an armchair, but rose again immediately, as if

he were not in the mood for sitting still. He must have been wearing a different wig, for the joins in this one showed as plain as murder.

‘You’d like to see over the flat, I expect?’ he asked, nervously touching his temples with the tips of his fingers.

‘I should, very much.’ I smiled, puzzled because Mr Norris was obviously in a great hurry about something. With fussy haste, he took me by the elbow, steering me towards the door in the opposite wall, from which he himself had just emerged.

‘We’ll go this way first, yes.’

But hardly had we taken a couple of steps when there was a sudden outburst of voices from the entrance hall.

‘You can’t. It’s impossible,’ came the voice of the young man who had ushered me into the flat. And a strange, loud, angry voice answered: ‘That’s a dirty lie! I tell you he’s here!’

Mr Norris stopped as suddenly as if he’d been shot. ‘Oh dear!’ he whispered, hardly audible. ‘Oh dear!’ Stricken with indecision and alarm, he stood still in the middle of the room, as though desperately considering which way to turn. His grip on my arm tightened, either for support or merely to implore me to keep quiet.

‘Mr Norris will not be back until late this evening.’ The young man’s voice was no longer apologetic, but firm. ‘It’s no good your waiting.’

He seemed to have shifted his position and to be just outside, perhaps barring the way into the sitting-room. And, the next moment, the sitting-room door was quietly shut, with a click of a key being turned. We were locked in.

‘He’s in there!’ shouted the strange voice, loud and menacing. There was a scuffling, followed by a heavy thud, as if the young man had been flung violently against the door. The thud roused Mr Norris to action. With a single, surprisingly agile movement, he dragged me after him into the adjoining room. We stood there together in the doorway,



ready, at any moment, for a further retreat. I could hear him panting heavily at my side.

Meanwhile, the stranger was rattling the sitting-room door as if he meant to burst it open: 'You damned swindler!' he shouted in a terrible voice. 'You wait till I get my hands on you!'

It was all so very extraordinary that I quite forgot to feel frightened, although it might well be supposed that the person on the other side of the door was either raving drunk or insane. I cast a questioning glance at Mr Norris, who whispered reassuringly: 'He'll go away in a minute, I think.' The curious thing was that, although scared, he didn't seem at all surprised by what was taking place. It might have been imagined, from his tone, that he was referring to an unpleasant but frequently recurring natural phenomenon: a violent thunder-storm, for instance. His blue eyes were warily, uneasily alert. His hands rested on the door handle, prepared to slam it shut at an instant's notice.

But Mr Norris had been right. The stranger soon got tired of rattling the sitting-room door. With an explosion of Berlin curses, his voice retreated. A moment later, we heard the outside door of the flat close with a tremendous bang.

Mr Norris drew a long breath of relief. 'I knew it couldn't last long,' he remarked with satisfaction. Abstractedly pulling an envelope out of his pocket, he began fanning himself with it. 'So upsetting,' he murmured. 'Some people seem to be utterly lacking in consideration . . . My dear boy, I really must apologize for this disturbance. Quite unforeseen, I assure you.'

I laughed. 'That's all right. It was rather exciting.'

Mr Norris seemed pleased. 'I'm glad you take it so lightly. It's so rare to find anyone of your age who's free from these ridiculous bourgeois prejudices. I feel that we have a great deal in common.'

'Yes, I think we have,' I said, without, however, being quite clear as to which particular prejudices he found ridiculous or

how they applied to the angry visitor.

‘In the course of my long and not uneventful life, I can truthfully say that for sheer stupidity and obstructiveness, I have never met anyone to equal the small Berlin tradesman. I’m not speaking, now, mind you, of the larger firms. They’re always reasonable: more or less . . .’

He was evidently in a confidential mood and might have imparted a good deal of interesting information, had not the sitting-room door now been unlocked and the young man with the large head reappeared on the threshold. The sight of him seemed to disconnect instantly the thread of Mr Norris’s ideas. His manner became at once apologetic, apprehensive, and vague, as though he and I had been caught doing something socially ridiculous which could only be passed off by an elaborate display of etiquette.

‘Allow me to introduce: Herr Schmidt – Mr Bradshaw. Herr Schmidt is my secretary and my right hand. Only, in this case,’ Mr Norris tittered nervously, ‘I can assure you that the right hand knows perfectly well what the left hand doeth.’

With several small nervous coughs he attempted to translate this joke into German. Herr Schmidt, who clearly didn’t understand it, did not even bother to pretend to be amused. He gave me a private smile, however, which invited me to join him in tolerant contemptuous patronage of his employer’s attempts at humour. I didn’t respond. I had taken a dislike to Schmidt already. He saw this, and at the moment I was pleased that he saw it.

‘Can I speak to you alone?’ he said to Mr Norris, in a tone which was obviously intended to insult me. His tie, collar, and lounge suit were as neat as ever. I could see no sign whatever of the violent handling he had apparently just received.

‘Yes. Er – yes. Certainly. Of course.’ Mr Norris’s tone was petulant but meek. ‘You’ll excuse me, my dear boy, a moment? I hate to keep my guests waiting, but this little matter is rather urgent.’

He hurried across the sitting-room and disappeared through a third door, followed by Schmidt. Schmidt was going to tell him the details of the row, of course. I considered the possibility of eavesdropping, but decided that it would be too risky. Anyhow, I should be able to get it out of Mr Norris one day, when I knew him better. Mr Norris did not give one the impression of being a discreet man.

I looked around me and found that the room in which I had all this time been standing was a bedroom. It was not very large, and the available space was almost entirely occupied by a double bed, a bulky wardrobe and an elaborate dressing-table with a winged mirror, on which were ranged bottles of perfume, lotions, antiseptics, pots of face cream, skin food, powder, and ointment enough to stock a chemist's shop. I furtively opened a drawer in the table. I found nothing in it but two lipsticks and an eyebrow pencil. Before I could investigate further, I heard the door into the sitting-room open.

Mr Norris re-entered fussily. 'And now, after this most regrettable interlude, let us continue our personally conducted tour of the royal apartments. Before you, you behold my chaste couch; I had it specially made for me in London. German beds are so ridiculously small, I always think. It's fitted with the best spiral springs. As you observe, I'm conservative enough to keep to my English sheets and blankets. The German feather-bags give me the most horrible nightmares.'

He talked rapidly with a great show of animation, but I saw at once that the conversation with his secretary had depressed him. It seemed more tactful not to refer again to the stranger's visit. Mr Norris evidently wanted the subject to be dropped. Fishing a key out of his waistcoat pocket, he unlocked and threw open the door of the wardrobe.

'I've always made it a rule to have a suit for every day of the week. Perhaps you'll tell me I'm vain, but you'd be surprised if you knew what it had meant to me, at critical

moments of my life, to be dressed exactly in accordance with my mood. It gives one such confidence, I think.'

Beyond the bedroom was a dining-room.

'Please admire the chairs,' said Mr Norris, and added – rather strangely as I thought at the time: 'I may tell you that this suite has been valued at four thousand marks.'

From the dining-room, a passage led to the kitchen, where I was introduced to a dour-faced young man who was busy preparing the tea.

'This is Hermann, my major-domo. He shares the distinction, with a Chinese boy I had years ago in Shanghai, of being the best cook I have ever employed.'

'What were you doing in Shanghai?'

Mr Norris looked vague. 'Ah. What is one ever doing anywhere? Fishing in troubled waters, I suppose one might call it. Yes . . . I'm speaking now, mind you, of nineteen hundred and three. Things are very different nowadays, I'm told.'

We returned to the sitting-room, followed by Hermann with the tray.

'Well, well,' observed Mr Norris, taking his cup, 'we live in stirring times; tea-stirring times.'

I grinned awkwardly. It was only later, when I knew him better that I realized that these aged jokes (he had a whole repertoire of them) were not even intended to be laughed at. They belonged merely to certain occasions in the routine of his day. Not to have made one of them would have been like omitting to say a grace.

Having thus performed his ritual, Mr Norris relapsed into silence. He must be worrying about the noisy caller again. As usual, when left to my own devices, I began studying his wig. I must have been staring very rudely, for he looked up suddenly and saw the direction of my gaze. He startled me by asking simply:

'Is it crooked?'

I blushed scarlet. I felt terribly embarrassed.

‘Just a tiny bit, perhaps.’

Then I laughed outright. We both laughed. At that moment I could have embraced him. We had referred to the thing at last, and our relief was so great that we were like two people who have just made a mutual declaration of love.

‘It wants to go a shade more to the left,’ I said, reaching out a helpful hand. ‘May I . . .’

But this was going too far. ‘My God, no!’ cried Mr Norris, drawing back with involuntary dismay. An instant later he was himself again, and smiled ruefully.

‘I’m afraid that this is one of those – er – mysteries of the toilet which are best performed in the privacy of the boudoir. I must ask you to excuse me.’

‘I’m afraid this one doesn’t fit very well,’ he continued, returning from his bedroom some minutes later. ‘I’ve never been fond of it. It’s only my second best.’

‘How many have you got, then?’

‘Three altogether.’ Mr Norris examined his finger-nails with a modest proprietary air.

‘And how long do they last?’

‘A very short time, I’m sorry to say. I’m obliged to get a new one every eighteen months or so, and they’re exceedingly expensive.’

‘How much, roughly?’

‘Between three and four hundred marks.’ He was seriously informative. ‘The man who makes them for me lives in Köln and I’m obliged to go there myself to get them fitted.’

‘How tiresome for you.’

‘It is indeed.’

‘Tell me just one more thing. However do you manage to make it stay on?’

‘There’s a small patch with glue on it.’ Mr Norris lowered his voice a little, as though this were the greatest secret of all: ‘Just here.’

‘And you find that’s sufficient?’

‘For the ordinary wear and tear of daily life, yes. All the same, I’m bound to admit that there have been various occasions in my chequered career, occasions which I blush to think of, when all has been lost.’

After tea, Mr Norris showed me his study, which lay behind the door on the other side of the sitting-room.

‘I’ve got some very valuable books here,’ he told me. ‘Some very *amusing* books.’ His tone coyly underlined the words. I stopped to read the titles: *The Girl with the Golden Whip. Miss Smith’s Torture-Chamber. Imprisoned at a Girls’ School, or The Private Diary of Montague Dawson, Flagellant.* This was my first glimpse of Mr Norris’s sexual tastes.

‘One day I’ll show you some of the other treasures of my collection,’ he added archly, ‘when I feel I know you well enough.’

He led the way through into a little office. This, I realized, was where the unwelcome visitor must have been waiting at the time of my own arrival. It was strangely bare. There was a chair, a table, a filing cabinet, and, on the wall, a large map of Germany. Schmidt was nowhere to be seen.

‘My secretary has gone out,’ Mr Norris explained, his uneasy eyes wandering over the walls with a certain distaste, as if this room had unpleasant associations for him. ‘He took the typewriter to be cleaned. This was what he wanted to see me about, just now.’

This lie seemed so entirely pointless that I felt rather offended. I didn’t expect him to confide in me yet; but he needn’t treat me like an imbecile. I felt absolved from any lingering scruples about asking pointed questions, and said, with frank inquisitiveness:

‘What is it, exactly, that you export and import?’

He took it quite calmly. His smile was disingenuous and bland.

‘My dear boy, what in my time, have I *not* exported? I think I may claim to have exported everything which is – er