

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Minute for Murder

Nicholas Blake

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About the Book

The Second World War has just finished and amateur detective and poet Nigel Strangeways is working at the Ministry of Morale in London, in the Visual Propaganda Division. With war over, life seems to be calm again, that is until the Director's beautiful secretary is poisoned in full view of seven members of the division, including Nigel himself. Who could have killed her? And how?

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

Malice in Wonderland

The Case of the Abominable Snowman

The Smiler with the Knife

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

Minute for Murder

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

CHAPTER I

OPEN NEW FILE

THE CLEANER ROSE from her knees, collecting bucket, brush and duster, and creaked towards the door. There, as usual, she turned, beamed, said, "Ta-ta, Mr. Strangeways, be good," before clanking off to do the Deputy Director. Mrs. Smith had been above herself ever since, two years ago, a popular actor had given a radio talk about a Mrs. Smith, a charwoman with gouty knees and a lion heart, who cleaned her Government office while the bombs whistled round her ears, and represented all the indomitable charwomanhood of Great Britain going about its task with a heartbreak in its collective bosom and a racy Cockney joke on its lips. Mrs. Smith had taken the tribute as a personal one, treating her Government gentlemen thereafter with an easy camaraderie for the higher grades and a certain hauteur for the lower.

Nigel Strangeways, as usual, blew the dust off his desk, and emptied yesterday's cigarette stubs out of the window. It was nine in the morning. He liked to start work early, before the telephone and his colleagues could interrupt. Until ten o'clock the Ministry of Morale would be silent, but for the clankings of the Mrs. Smiths and the furtive scurryings of a few conscientious junior officers not yet affected by the slackening of morale which had set in since V.E. Day. Nigel drew out a sheet of draft photo-captions, composed by Brian Ingle.

Swift and inexorable as a sheaf of arrows flung from the hand of Nemesis, he read, these Spitfires are pranging German rail traffic concentrations in the Gelsenkirchen area.

He altered "pranging" to "attacking." He scribbled in the margin, "Arrows are not flung by hand." He glanced at the photograph to which the caption was keyed and added, "They are Typhoons." Good old Brian, he thought: incurably inaccurate; invincibly romantic; never at a loss for the wrong word, the muddled metaphor—what should we do without him? Poor old Brian, after five years of it still bringing to the labours of caption-writing the same luscious and uncritical enthusiasm which before the war had made him the ace novel reviewer of the *Sunday Clarion*. Clever of Jimmy to pick him for the job. But Jimmy *was* clever at picking his staff. That's what made him a first-rate Director. "No," he had said firmly at the start, "I don't want advertising men for my Division. I want people who believe in what they are saying. We shan't sell this war to the public with our tongues in our cheeks." And how right he was. When Brian Ingle told the public that a squadron of Spitfires (or Typhoons) were a sheaf of arrows flung from the hand of Nemesis, the public believed him, the appropriate response was registered once again: a just war. Nigel took his indiarubber and rubbed out "Arrows are not flung by hand."

The door opened. A Messenger shambled in, his arms heaped with files and letters. As usual, he looked helplessly about him, then moved with the compulsive gait of a sleep-walker to Nigel's desk, placed a selection from his burden in the Out-tray and remarked dismally that it was a beautiful morning for the time of year. As usual, Nigel moved the pile of documents from the Out-tray to the In-tray. Yes, it was a beautiful morning, he agreed, glancing at the rent in the opaque material which the Office of Works

had pasted over the window frame when the glass was shattered by a flying bomb.

"We've not seen the half of it yet," said the Messenger darkly.

"The half of what?"

"You mark my words, sir. When peace comes, as you might say real peace, there'll be chay-oh in this country. Proper chay-oh."

Nigel translated rapidly to "chaos."

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"Stands to reason. Millions of young men trained to kill—proper artful too; look at these here Commandos and such, unarmed combat my eye, plug 'em in the tripes with a tommy-gun more like—well, they comes back, and what do they find?"

"Chay-oh," replied Nigel involuntarily. "That is to say —"

"You said it. Missus gone off with a chap, couple of extra nippers in the house, some embuskay sitting on his fanny in your job—what do you do? Stands to reason. Start shooting. Violence begets violence—see Aldous bleedin' 'Uxley. Millions of 'em. Now after my war," continued the Messenger, indicating the 1914-18 medal ribbons on his dark-blue uniform, "it was different. All killed off we was. What come back, we'd 'ad enough: anything for a quiet life. Cowed, that's what we were. You may think it a 'arsh saying of mine, sir, but this war hasn't killed off enough, not on your bleedin' puff it ain't. Now take this 'ere demob scheme."

After ten minutes of social analysis, the Messenger nodded morosely to Nigel and ambled out, dropping in the doorway a large envelope marked with a red "Most Secret" tab, two files and a pink letter addressed to James Lake, Esq., C.B.E., and giving off an unofficial perfume. Calling back the oblivious Messenger, Nigel restored the large envelope and the files into his arms. The letter he decided

to deliver himself: it would give him an excuse for a chat with Our Blonde.

Our Blonde, as the Director's personal secretary, Nita Prince, was called throughout the length and breadth of the Visual Propaganda Division, represented visual propaganda at its full range and dizziest peak. She combined, as Merrion Squires, the art-work Specialist, put it, the crude appeal of the poster, the mystery of the isotype, the glamour of the glossy studio portrait, the golden mediocrity of Brian Ingle's captions. In the tradition of the Visual Propaganda Division, she concealed high efficiency beneath a studied vagueness, amateurishness, insouciance. When Nigel entered, she was pecking helplessly at an In-tray brimming with documents, her bright hair tumbling over her face.

"Hallo, Nita."

She straightened up from bending over the desk, a tall, smooth-limbed creature, and gave Nigel the full benefit of her morning make-up.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "Look at this In-tray. I sometimes wonder why we go on at all."

"We go on because the British people, having unsheathed the sword, will not lightly sheathe it until, shoulder by shoulder with our gallant allies, we have slashed off the last hydra-head of the totalitarian aggressor."

"If you ask me, we don't sheathe it because a sword is a damned sight more difficult to sheathe than to unsheathe—you watch 'em trying to do it on the stage. What've you got there?"

Nigel held up the pink, perfumed envelope.

"Another love-letter for the boss. Old Kirby dropped it in my room."

Nita Prince's ravishing face gave no hint of emotion, not even that faintest smirk of self-satisfaction which reveals the woman confident in her own power against all

competitors. She was reaching out for the letter when the telephone on her desk rang.

"Hallo. This is V.P.D. Yes? . . . No, the Director is in conference, I'm afraid. I'm his secretary. Can I help you? . . . Oh, Mr. Snaith. Good-morning." Nita Prince rolled up her eyes in a look of mute long-suffering at Nigel, and holding the receiver away from her ear, fished in her bag for a cigarette. Nigel lit it. The telephone crackled and gobbled.

"Well," said Nita, when it was silent for a moment, "we're getting on as fast as we can with your folder. We should be able to show you pulls in a fortnight's time." The telephone came back with an atmospheric storm. "Yes, we quite appreciate the urgency. It's too bad your having to wait so long," replied Nita, in a voice like molten honey, "but there was a difficulty over a canned photograph: the Censor has not yet released it . . . What? . . . No, the Naval Censor. *Your* Censor, Mr. Snaith"—Nita put out her tongue at the invisible Mr. Snaith, who was momentarily silenced. The atmospherics started again.

"Oh, that's another matter. You should really speak to the head of the Editorial Unit about that."

Nigel made for the door.

"An incompetent bungler? Oh, come, Mr. Snaith! Perhaps you'd like to have a word with him now; he happens to be in the room . . . No? . . . Well, I'm afraid the Director is very busy to-day. Let me see"—without referring to her engagement book, Nita reeled off a list of the Director's commitments. "To-day doesn't seem possible. And to-morrow . . . oh, you can't manage to-morrow? Well, perhaps we'd better leave it then. You can rely on us to fulfil our dates . . . Yes, it's going very nicely. The wholesalers have ordered just over 700,000 copies already, and it's being translated into six, no eight foreign languages, I believe. . . . Yes, we'll keep you informed. Good-bye, Mr. Snaith."

"The human calculating machine," said Nigel. Then, obscurely feeling the remark to be a shade off-colour, "I just don't know how you keep all those statistics at your fingertips."

"Oh, I forget nothing. Born that way."

"What's Snaith fussing about now?"

"That new job in the Pacific series. Silly old hen. These Public Relations Officers ought to be blotted out. And Snaith's the worst of the whole bunch. A flea in your ear on the telephone, and a pinch on the bottom when he pays a personal visit."

"If I was a naval rating in the Pacific," said Nigel dreamily, "I shouldn't want a folder full of pictures of bamboo huts and potted Melanesian history, and how to be tactful with the natives; I should want a folder full of huge great pictures of whopping great pin-up girls. Like yourself."

"You'd better discuss your change of policy with Jimmy, then," replied Nita, smiling faintly. "And I wish you'd go away. Haven't you any work to do? Let's have that letter first."

Nigel flipped it on to her desk. At the door, he turned round. Nita was staring at the letter, where it lay, with a frozen look, as though it were some venomous tropical spider suddenly appeared on her desk. She quite noticeably refrained from touching it. Her fingers were locked rigidly in her lap.

"It won't bite," said Nigel from the door.

Nita Prince started. "Oh, damn you, Nigel! Do get out or come in properly. I can't bear people standing in doorways. . . . Sorry, I'm fussed this morning. That pestilent Snaith."

Oh, no, thought Nigel, you've been dealing with Snaiths for nearly six years and not turned a hair. It's the letter. And as you haven't opened the letter, it's the handwriting on the envelope. Someone has written to Jimmy who

shouldn't be writing to Jimmy. Someone out of your past life, perhaps? Well, let it go. It's not my business.

But Nigel's inveterate curiosity about other people's lives would not let it go. It was the first time he had seen the ravishing and all-conquering Miss Prince thoroughly shaken. Even during the summer of the previous year, when flying bombs passed as frequently as a suburban train service over the Ministry of Morale, and the top storey of the building jerked and swayed with their explosions, she had remained at her desk, taking down minutes, soothing ruffled telephone-callers, enclosed in her usual aura of invulnerability. "Any sensitive bomb," Merrion Squires had remarked, "would think twice before making a date with Our Blonde." But Squires, as he was the first to admit, did not believe in blondes, on principle.

Sitting in his own room again, mechanically glancing through a MS. entitled *The War Story of our Four-Legged Friends*, which had been sent to the Minister by an optimistic animal-lover with the request that it should be published at the Government's expense, fully illustrated ("I have some perfectly sweet snaps of my own doggie, Mopkins, who has been on Active Service throughout the blitzes, always barking to warn me when the sirens went"), Nigel reflected how little he really knew about his colleagues. From 1940 till a few months ago, they had all been working their heads off—anything from ten to fourteen hours a day—all, that is to say, but Edgar Billson, one of the permanent Civil Servants on the staff, who knew his rights and departed, bowler hat, umbrella and brief-case (empty) sharp at five every evening. But, slogging away like that, year after year, though your fellow-sloggers became as familiar as the face of your watch, their private lives, like the works of the watch when it is in perfect running order, were not disclosed. One knew that Merrion Squires disbelieved in blondes; that Brian Ingle had a weak heart; that Edgar Billson lived at Pinner; that Jimmy Lake

was married to a nice quiet girl who gave him his head. But, now that the worst was over, such scraps of information were not enough for Nigel's inquiring turn of mind.

For instance, was Nita Prince Jimmy's lover? The Division, for the most part, assumed that she was. But Nigel had been much too busy to find out, and too tired to care. And had Brian Ingle, who treated her like the Holy Grail, any conception of the human being she really was? Had Nigel himself, for that matter? And why did Harker Fortescue, normally an uncompromising, rough-tongued man, fail to discipline Merrion Squires, who so often spoke to him disrespectfully in the presence of junior officers? And was Edgar Billson as pompous at home as in the Ministry?

I shall start a new file, said Nigel to himself: a Most Secret file; a dossier on the Division. I shall see how much, during the few remaining months I have to stay in Government service, I can find out about my colleagues. And I shall put it all down in my Most Secret file. And, the day I go, I shall burn it. It will get my hand into practice again. The hour may yet strike when I shall be dabbling once more in crime. Though God forbid!

To him, at this auspicious moment, entered Brian Ingle. A smallish, fattish, fairish man, he gave the impression of always going through life at a trot. He trotted up to Nigel's desk and all but wagged his tail.

"Oh, yes, your captions," said Nigel. Ingle's brown eyes began to sparkle with a dotty kind of enthusiasm. "I've suggested one or two alterations. Those aircraft are surely Typhoons? And——"

"Of course, of course," interrupted Brian Ingle breathlessly. "But you like them? On the whole? Up to standard, you think? Not just a leetle too, ah, rhetorical?"

"No, they'll do very well. With the alterations I've suggested," added Nigel firmly.

Brian Ingle, he knew by experience, was in love with his own words. All of them. For ever and ever. He was quite capable of putting them back at final proof stage. It was quite a game between him and Nigel: Nigel had, in fact, invented an elaborate procedure for counter-checking final proofs, largely in order to block this manoeuvre of Ingle's.

"What amazes me is how you keep it up."

Ingle perched himself on the edge of Nigel's desk.

"Keep it up?"

"Yes. The German War over, and you turn out captions about it still with all the sacred fire of 1940."

"You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"No. What I mean is, no one's going to be interested in this *D-Day to V-Day* production. The subject is dead. The public are sick of stories, photographs, exhibitions, films about the war. We're only going on with the production because the Service Departments can't fight down their lust for publicity—a lust we ourselves, I admit, were first responsible for provoking in them; or rather, they can't bear the thought of another few hundred tons of paper not being wasted in the good old Service way, and—where was I?"

"You'd better not let Jimmy hear you talking like that." Brian giggled. "But seriously, if you mean why do I go on putting my best into this show, when there's nothing but paper in the house—I say, rather an appropriate metaphor that! . . . Well, I suppose the answer is that I enjoy writing. Writing anything."

Ingle had come out with this last revelation after one of those long, silent pauses for incubation, or self-examination, which contrasted so oddly with his normal brisk and breathless manner. Nigel's heart warmed to the little chap. He decided to become outrageously personal.

"And because, having moved heaven and earth to get into the Armed Forces, and been turned down every time

on your medical, you thought the next best thing you could do was to work yourself to death here?"

Brian Ingle was petrified for a moment with the Englishman's embarrassment at such intimacies. Then he unexpectedly thawed.

"Oh, nonsense. That applies to all of us, anyway. No, the fact is I have all the creative writer's equipment, except creativeness. Curiosity, exuberance, spiritual stamina—the whole paraphernalia. But I can't invent. So I became a crit—a book-reviewer. So now I write flaming captions: the photographs supply the invention, the ideas; I just embroider on them."

It would have been Nigel's turn to be embarrassed, if he had been capable of such a reaction. His habit of regarding human behaviour with absolute detachment, never colouring it with his own emotions and prejudices, prevented this, however.

"You ought to get married," he pursued.

Another of Ingle's pregnant and interminable silences followed. He seemed to be studying the suggestion, an abstracted look in his brown eyes, from every possible angle. Or perhaps he was merely embarrassed again.

"Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth?" he replied at last. "Perhaps you're right. Trouble is, I have rather a high standard that way. Unlike my novel-reviewing, the high-brow boys would say," he added with a wry twitch of the mouth.

He seemed to be on the point of further disclosures when the door blew open as though a bomb had exploded in the passage, and Pamela Finlay, Nigel's assistant, rushed in.

"Morning, all! Sorry I'm late, Strangeways. Been at the dentist. Pheugh!—what a fug!"

She strode past Nigel, papers fluttering off the desks behind her, so that the long narrow room resembled a permanent way in the wake of an express, and flung open

the double window. Standing at the window, she inhaled vigorously and sketched a few deep-breathing exercises. Brian Ingle was trotting about the room, picking up papers.

"I really think I must buy one of those sticks with points on the end that park-tidiers have," Nigel remarked mildly. "I should quite like to be a tidier of parks."

"Here are your Vallombrosa leaves, Miss West-Wind," said Brian coyly.

"Vallom——? Oh, the high-brows at it again. Shelley, huh? T'chah! Well, to work!"

Miss Finlay tore off her coat in a frenzied manner, as though it was the shirt of Nessus, plumped down at her desk, and glared at the papers on it.

"Brian and I were discussing marriage," said Nigel. "In our high-brow way."

"The stroke's not on," said Miss Finlay decisively.

"Not on?"

"Not on. That is, if you're referring to Ingle's prospects. She wouldn't have him. And I may say, Ingle, if you knew what's good for you, you'd thank your stars she won't. It beats me how men——"

But Brian Ingle, colouring deeply, had snatched up his captions and photographs from Nigel's desk and scuttled from the room.

"The tactlessness of women makes my blood run cold," said Nigel presently.

"Oh, bosh! Why can't you men ever look facts in the face?"

Pamela Finlay plunged at the internal telephone, and proceeded to conduct one of her celebrated dual-conversation turns.

"Three five nine three . . . Everyone knows that Our Blonde . . . Hallo, Three five nine three? Bloggs? Mr. Strangeways' assistant speaking. Where are those proofs? The Far East series, number four . . . is a human limpet, and it's not Ingle she's fastened to . . . But you promised

them yesterday. . . . However much *he* may be stuck on *her* . . . Come clean, Bloggs! Have the proof-readers started on it yet? . . . What he needs is the mother type . . . Oh, they've nearly finished? I've heard that one before . . . not the courtesan. Anyway, Our Blonde is faithful after her fashion. . . . I know you're busy; so are we: the dead-line for the printers is the 15th. Mr. Strangeways must have those proofs by midday sharp. If necessary, I shall come and fetch them in person."

The threat evidently sufficed. Miss Finlay slammed down the receiver while it still cackled unconditional surrender, and resumed the other branch of her conversation.

". . . After her *fashion*. Which means one man at a time. And that's all it does mean. She was supposed to be engaged to Charles Kennington when he was working here. And the moment *he* left, she was off with Jimmy. I admit she's given him a long run. Maybe he's got under her skin. But it doesn't stop her treating all the rest of you males to that enigmatic, come-hither-if-you-dare look, now and then. And you all fall for it. Poor little Ingle. T'chah! The fact is, she can't help it. Give her that."

"Well, well, well," commented Nigel.

"Go on, say it."

"Say what?"

"Say I'm jealous. Of course I am. Any healthy woman would be. The whole of this floor buzzing with eligible males, and all of 'em buzzing round Nita. Shocking maldistribution of the basic commodities."

Miss Finlay's boisterous laugh rattled the partition walls, already much shaken by the blast of V-bombs. The usual minatory knocking sounded from the Deputy Director's room next door.

"Including Fortescue?" asked Nigel.

"Oh, he's a deep one, is old Hark'ee."

"What I was thinking is—how little we all know about each other. Of course, the place has always been full of

gossip. But it never meant much: there was no malice in it, no deep curiosity really. We've been working too hard to have strong personal feelings. Or at any rate, we've repressed them, in the interests of making an efficient Division, and helping to win the war; and because blitzes breed a certain tolerance for one's fellow-blitzees. But now everything has slacked off, don't you think all those repressed personal feelings are going to rise to the surface? In fact, haven't they begun to, lately?"

"You mean, the Division has been getting bloody-minded?"

"Some of us, wouldn't you say?"

"Let me think."

Miss Finlay was one who commonly suited the action to the word. She knitted her brow, buried her large, fresh-complexioned face in her hands, ran her fingers through her frizzy mop of hair.

"I'm trying to remember—of course, it was the Thursday before last. It was my turn for lunch-time duty at the Divisional Call Point. Well, I'd just sat down at the telephone with my knitting, when the D.D. poked his nose through the door and said I could scat; he'd be in his room all lunch-time and would answer any calls. I thought it a bit odd. Hark'ee doesn't usually go out of his way to pamper the lower grades. Well, I nipped back in here, and I footled about a bit; and then, just as I was going over to the canteen, I heard a sort of shindy blowing up in the D.D.'s room. Him and—you'd never imagine who. Give you two guesses."

"General Eisenhower."

Pamela Finlay let out one of her bawls of laughter.

"Don't be an ape! It was that twerp, Billson."

"Hark'ee slanging Billson? Nothing odd about that. We all do. Have to keep the Permanents in their place."

"No, what was funny was that Billson seemed to be making the running. You know how correct he is.

Deferential attitude to senior officers and all that. Well, he didn't sound at all deferential. Of course, I couldn't hear much of what they said, through this wall. But the tone of the voices sounded like blue murder. Billson's especially. I ought to have a blister on my ear still, the way I pressed it to the wall. I did hear Billson say, 'This is the last chance I'll give you.' And a bit later Hark'ee, very coldly, 'You're in a cleft stick, Billson, and you know it,' and then something about 'Go to the dogs, for all I care.' I got the impression that Billson was threatening the D.D. and the D.D. sort of bouncing him off good and hard."

"What fun! Anything else?"

"Just the name 'Prince.' It seemed to crop up quite often."

"Oh, lord! Back to Nita again."

"Yup. And that was all. Except, when I was just toddling off to the canteen, Billson shot out of the D.D.'s room and swept past me with such a look on his face as you never saw."

"What sort of look?"

"Absolutely furious. No, furious isn't quite the word." Pamela Finlay tousled her hair, as though searching in it for the *mot juste*. "Desperate. Like a sheep at bay," she brought out triumphantly. "So what do you make of all that?"

"Simple. Billson discovers the D.D. is having an affair with Nita. Attempts to blackmail him. The D.D. retorts smartly that Billson is in a cleft stick, as he (the D.D.) knows for a fact that he (Billson) has a family of no less than eight illegitimate children by Nita."

The room quaked with the blast of Miss Finlay's laughter. Angry knocking again sounded from the next room. The telephone rang.

"For you," said Miss Finlay.

The voice of Harker Fortescue's secretary said:

“The Deputy Director presents his compliments, and requests that Mr. Strangeways should buy a silencer and fix it on his assistant. Also, he wants to see you after coffee. Message ends.”

Not long afterwards, the rumbling of trolley wheels at the far end of the passage was heard, and a voice dismally wailing, “Coffee! Coffee!”

Miss Finlay gathered up two cups and hurled herself out of the door.

Nigel sipped the beverage known in the Ministry of Morale as coffee. It did not improve with the years—an almost colourless liquid, which might have been brewed from a compound of acorns, dish-cloths and wormwood. Miss Finlay, who cherished a mild, motherly affection for him, was in the habit of slipping two or three lumps of sugar from a private store into his cup; but they did little to palliate the bitter draught.

“What I was thinking of,” said Nigel dreamily, “was higher up.”

Miss Finlay knitted her brow in an agony of concentration, like a child trying to do a difficult sum in mental arithmetic.

“Yes, higher up still,” Nigel pursued. “Jimmy himself is showing signs of wear and tear, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t know. Don’t move at such dizzy levels myself.”

“Of course, after six years one might expect it. But I don’t get the impression that it’s just ordinary war-weariness.”

Nigel fell silent. He was thinking. Jimmy’s got amazing stamina; he kept us all going through the worst of it. He put the machine together and supplied the lubricant—his tact is quite incredible—never puts a foot wrong in dealing with his staff—and what a heterogeneous, awkward lot of chaps we are! But lately I feel he’s been losing his grip—not losing it, perhaps, but having to drive himself to keep it.

Distract at times. Has to wrench his mind back to the business on hand. Not quite so quick and confident when there's a decision to be made. A bit irritable, and that's the strangest thing of all in a man who's always been so even-tempered. Well, maybe it's just reaction after the strain. The war's nearly over: we shall be disbanded in six months' time with any luck; and then he can go back to his old job and take things easy. He's a good chap. I've got really fond of him.

Five minutes later, Nigel went next door to the Deputy Director. Harker Fortescue, as usual, was telephoning. He flipped a cigarette at Nigel, who plumped down in the luxurious leather arm-chair intended for the use of only the most distinguished visitors, and patiently waited. He studied, more attentively than usual after Miss Finlay's queer little story, the bald head, the dyspeptically-hollowed face, the cold and fishy eye of his immediate superior. The façade was familiar; it told him nothing new to-day. He had realised long ago that it *was* a façade. Beneath the carefully cultivated, managerial manner, the brusqueness, the impersonal drawl of the voice, at this moment all concentrated upon the discomfiture of whoever it might be at the other end of the line, there was undoubtedly, however much some of the staff might take leave to doubt it, a human being.

Nigel had discovered this human being in the course of the bad years, when he and Fortescue toiled together, night after night, in a dour attempt to keep abreast of the ever-growing work commissioned from the Division by other Ministries.

Sooner or later, often after midnight, they would repair to the canteen, staggering with weariness, and Nigel would consume a trayful of spam, pickles, bread, buns and blancmange, while Fortescue toyed with a glass of milk. It was during these collations of the small hours that Fortescue revealed his secret passion. For years and years,

with the zest and maniac pertinacity of a small boy autograph-hunting, he had collected—not autographs, not stamps, not china, not furniture, not matchbox lids, nor rare moths; but what he called “my feelthy peectures.” These were not filthy pictures in the accredited sense of the term. They were snapshots of the great, the famous or the notorious, caught in ill-considered or mercifully oblivious poses—pictures taken for the most part before the advent of that universal leveller, the “candid camera.” His search for such treasures had taken him all over the world: he attended auction sales and combed old junk shops to buy photograph albums. He possessed an ancient film-still showing Tolstoy brusquely rejecting a bouquet offered by his simpering wife: he possessed a snapshot of Landru being arrested; another of Dame Melba taken from behind in the act of driving her opponent’s croquet ball into a shrubbery; another of an Archbishop, celebrated for his powerful sermons on asceticism, about to stuff his mouth with a huge forkful of caviare. He claimed—and Nigel was not altogether prepared to contest it—that the *clou* of his collection was a snapshot, taken by some icy-nerved aide-de-camp, of Hitler chewing the carpet.

All Harker Fortescue’s holidays from the photographic agency, which he ran in peacetime, had been devoted to this eccentric hobby. It was a hobby, thought Nigel now, wonderfully characteristic of the boyishness, the twisted sardonic humour, the streak of fantasy which underlay the Deputy Director’s working façade.

“Yes, I appreciate that,” Harker Fortescue was saying. “But it isn’t quite the point. If you want to present a complete picture of tank construction, it’s essential (a) that you do not attempt to gloss over the mistakes made in 1939-41, and (b) that you give full value to the contributions of the fighting soldier. That is basic”—(basic was a great word of Fortescue’s managerial personality). . . . “What’s that? . . . I can only say we’ve been doing this

work for six years and we reckon we know something about it." The Deputy Director's drawl grew more pronounced: his cold eye was fixed, hypnotically glittering, upon the invisible caller. "Of course, if you want a different kind of production, Mr. Walters, if you just want propaganda for your Minister, you can always go direct to the Print Office; I believe they undertake that sort of thing. We don't touch it here, we've a reputation to keep up; the public has got into the habit of expecting to hear the truth from us, within security limits of course, and our policy of giving them the truth pays good long-term dividends, I can assure you."

The Deputy Director swivelled his chair from east to south-east, a sure sign that the crisis was passing. Nigel thought, not for the first time, that in such telephone conversations Hark'ee resembled a sheep-dog, tirelessly coaxing, rounding, driving an obtuse, woolly-minded flock the way he wanted it to go, and occasionally snapping at an errant hoof. He was, indeed, the perfect second-string for Jimmy, with his remarkable grasp of detail and his cold pertinacity. Jimmy supplied the originality of approach, the broad outline of policy, the tact. Hark'ee contributed the logic, the ground work and the toughness.

Harker Fortescue gently replaced the receiver. Stroking his bald head, he turned to Nigel.

"That's fixed *him*. You'd better get on with it. Prepare an Acceptance Sheet for the job. They'll send a synopsis by Monday next. Put Billson on to a preliminary survey of the photographic material. And try and keep the Art Work Unit up to your schedule this time—they're getting slack. You'll have to deal with Walters from now on, but I've broken him in for you."

Fortescue continued to fire off instructions, which Nigel, apparently asleep in the arm-chair, memorised. Fortescue had long ago given up the effort to make Nigel take notes: indeed, he derived a certain subtle amusement from asking Nigel to repeat, after an arduous conference, some prolix