

Home

The black polished car drew up outside the brown tenement and he rested for a moment, his hands still on the wheel. He was a big man with a weatherbeaten red-veined face and a strong jaw. On one finger of his right hand was a square red ring. He looked both competent and hard.

After a while he got out, gazing round him and up at the sky with a hungry look as if he were scanning the veldt. His wife in furs got out more slowly. Her face had a haggard brownness like that of a desiccated gipsy and seemed to be held together, like a lacy bag, by the wrinkles.

He glanced up at the tenement with the cheerful animation of one who had left it, and yet with a certain curiosity.

'Lock the car, dear,' said his wife.

He stared at her for a moment in surprise and then said as if he had been listening to a witticism,

'But they don't steal things here.'

She smiled disdainfully.

They walked into the close whose walls were brown above and a dirty blue below, pitted with scars. Somebody had written in chalk the words Ya Bass. It looked for a moment African, and he stared at it as if it had recalled some memory.

On the other side of the road the flat-faced shops looked back at them blankly.

He pointed upwards to a window.

'Mind the Jamiesons?' he said.

She remembered them but took no pleasure in the memory.

The Jamiesons had lived above them and were, of course, Protestant. Not that at that level you could distinguish Catholic from Protestant except that the former went to chapel and the latter didn't. The O'Rahilly's house – for instance – had been full

of wee ornaments, and once she had seen a complete ornamental house showing, outside it, like Europeans outside a verandah, Christ and the twelve disciples, the whole thing painted a distasteful green.

She remembered Jamieson all right. Every Friday night he would dress up in his best blue suit, neat as a ray or razor, and would wave to his wife who was following his progress to the road from an open window, her scarf tight round her head. He would go off to the pub and pick a fight with a Catholic, or more likely three Catholics. At midnight he would come home covered with blood, his face bruised a fine Protestant blue, his clothes dirty and brown. He would walk like a victorious gladiator up the stair and then start a fight with his wife, uprooting chairs and wardrobes till the silence of exhaustion settled over the flats at about one in the morning. The next day his wife would descend the stair, her eyes black and blue, and say that she had stumbled at the sink. Her repertoire of invention was endless.

'I remember,' she said.

The town had changed a lot since they had left it, that much was clear. Now the old tenements were being knocked down and the people shuttled out to huge featureless estates where the windows revealed the blue sky of TV. There were hardly any picture houses left: they had been converted into bingo halls. Instead of small shops supermarkets were springing up, flexing their huge muscles. The lover's lane had disappeared. The park seemed to have lost its atmosphere of pastoral carelessness and was being decorated for the visitors with literate slogans in flowers.

'It's thirty-five years since we left,' said her husband.

And the wallet bulged from his breast pocket, a wife, two children, and a good job in administration.

He moved about restlessly. He wanted to tell someone how well he had done but how could he do that? All the people he had known were gone elsewhere, many of them presumably dead and completely forgotten.

'Do you mind old Hannah?' he said.

She had been a fat old woman who sat day after day at the

window leaning out of it talking to the passers-by. A fat woman with arthritis. He wondered vaguely what had happened to her.

'I wonder if the coal-house is still here. Come on.'

He took his wife by the hand and they walked down the close to the back. The coal-houses were incredibly still there, all padlocked and all beside each other, all with discoloured doors.

She kept her fur coat as far away from them as she could.

'Do you mind the day I went to the factor?' he said. The factor had been a small, buttoned-up, black-suited lawyer. In those days of poverty he himself had been frightened to visit him in his wee office with the dim glass door. He imagined what he would do to that factor now.

He had gone there after coming home from the office, and the wee lawyer in the undertaker's suit had said to him over his shoulder,

'What do you want?'

'I want to report the rain coming through the roof.'

'How much do you pay Jackson?'

'Fifteen shillings a week.'

'And what do you expect for fifteen shillings a week?' said the factor, as if even giving words away were an agony of the spirit. In a corner of the office an umbrella dripped what seemed to be black rain.

'I was hoping that the house would be dry anyway.'

'I'll send someone round tomorrow,' and the factor had bent down to study a ledger with a rusty red cover.

'You said that a week ago.'

'And I'm saying it again. I'm a busy man. I've got a lot to do.' At that moment he had been filled with a terrible reckless anger and was about to raise his fist when the factor looked up. His mouth opened slightly showing one gold tooth in the middle of the bottom row of teeth, and he said carefully,

'Next week.'

So he had walked out past the dispirited receptionist in the glass cage – the one with the limp and the ageing mother – and then home.

Thinking back on it now, he thought: I was treated like a black. That's what it amounted to. By God, like a black.

He wished that that factor was alive now so that he could show him his bank balance. The wee nyaff. The Scottish words rose unbidden to his mouth like bile.

For a moment he did in fact see himself as a black, cringing in that rotting office, suffering the contempt, hearing the black rain dripping behind him from the furled umbrella.

But then a black would buy a bicycle and forget all about his humiliation. Blacks weren't like us.

As he turned away from the coal-house door he saw the washing hanging from the ropes on the green.

'Ye widna like to be daeing that noo,' he told his wife jocularly.

'What would the Bruces say if they saw you running about in this dirty place like a schoolboy?' she said coldly.

'Whit dae ye mean?'

'Simply what I said. There was no need to come here at all. Or do you want to take a photograph and show it to them? "The Place Where I Was Born".'

'I wasna born here. I just lived here for five years.'

'What would they think of you, I wonder.'

'I don't give a damn about the Bruces,' he burst out, the veins on his forehead swelling. 'What's he but a doctor anyway? I'm not ashamed of it. And, by God, why should you be ashamed of it? You weren't brought up in a fine house either. You worked in a factory till I picked you up at that dance.'

She turned away.

'Do you mind that night?' he asked contritely. 'You were standing by the wall and I went up to you and I said, "Could I have the honour?" And when we were coming home we walked down lovers' lane, where they had all the seats and the statues.'

'And you made a clown of yourself,' she said unforgivingly.

'Yes, didn't I just?' remembering how he had climbed the statue in the moonlight to show off. From the top of it he could see the Clyde, the ships and the cranes.

'And remember the flicks?' he said. 'We used tae get in wi jam jars. And do you mind the man who used to come down the passage at the interval spraying us with disinfectant?'

The interior of the cinema came back to him in a warm flood:

the children in the front rows keeping up a continual barrage of noise, the ushers hushing them, the smoke, the warmth, the pies slapping against faces, the carved cherubs in the flaking roof blowing their trumpets.

'You'd like that, wouldn't you?' she said. 'Remember it was me who drove you to the top.'

'Whit dae ye mean?' – like a bull wounded in the arena.

'You were lazy, that was what was wrong with you. You'd go out ferreting when you were here. You liked being with the boys.'

'Nothing wrong with that. What's wrong wi that?'

'What do you want? That they should all wave flags? That all the dirty boys and girls should line the street with banners five miles high? They don't give a damn about you, you know that. They're all dead and rotting and we should be back in Africa where we belong.'

He heard the voices round him. It was New Year's Eve and they were all dancing in a restaurant which had a fountain in the middle, and in the basin hundreds of pennies.

'Knees up, Mother Brown,' Jamieson was shouting to Hannah.

'You used to dance, too,' he said, 'on New Year's Night.'

'I saw old Manson dying in that room,' he said, pointing at a window. The floor and the ceiling and the walls seemed to have drops of perspiration and Manson had a brown flannel cloth wrapped round his neck. He couldn't breathe. And he heard the mice scuttering behind the walls.

She turned on him. 'What are you bringing that up for? Why don't you forget it? Do you enjoy thinking about these things?'

'Shut up,' he shouted, 'you didn't even have proper table manners when I met you.'

She stalked out to the car and he stayed where he was. To hell with her. She couldn't drive anyway.

He just wondered if anyone they had known still remained. He climbed the stair quietly till he came to the door of their old flat. No gaslight there now. On the door was written the name 'Rafferty', and as he leaned down against the letter box he heard the blast of a radio playing a pop song.

He went down again quietly.

He thought of their own two rooms there once, the living room with the table, the huge Victorian wardrobe (which was too big for the bedroom) and the huge Victorian dresser.

As he looked out of the close he saw that his car was surrounded by a pack of children, his wife, sheltered behind glass, staring ahead of her, an empress surrounded by prairie dogs.

He rushed out. 'Hey,' he said, 'don't scratch my car.'

'Whit is it?' a hard voice shouted from above.

He looked up. 'Nothing,' he said, 'I was just telling them not to scratch my car.'

'Why have you goat it there onyway?'

The woman was thin and stringy and wore a cheap bracelet round her throat. A bit like Mrs Jamieson but less self-effacing.

'I was just paying a visit,' he said. 'I used to live here.'

'They're no daeing onything to your caur,' said the voice which was like a saw that would cut through steel forever.

'It's an expensive car,' he said, watching his wife who was sitting in it like a graven image, lips firmly pressed together.

Another window opened. 'Hey, you there! I'm on night shift. Let's get a bit of sleep. Right?'

A pair of hairy hands slammed the window down again.

Two tall youngsters chewing gum approached.

'Hey, mister, whit are you on about?' They stared at him, legs crossed, delicate narrow toes.

'Nice bus,' said the one with the long curving moustache.

'Nice bus, eh Charley?'

They moved forward in concert, a ballet.

'Look,' he began, 'I was just visiting.' Then he stopped. Should he tell them that he was a rich man who had made good? It might not be advisable. One of them absently kicked one of the front tyres and then suddenly said to his wife, 'Peek a boo'. She showed no sign that she had seen him. They reminded him of some Africans he had seen, insolent young toughs, town-bred.

'All right, boys,' he said in an ingratiating voice. 'We're going anyway. We've seen all we want.'

'Did you hear that, Micky? He's seen all he wants to see. Would you say that was an insult?' Micky gazed benevolently at him through a lot of hair.

'Depends. What have you seen, daddy?'

'I used to live here,' he said jovially. 'In the old days. The best years of my life.' The words rang hollow between them.

'Hear that?' said Micky. 'Hear him. He's left us. Daddy's left us.'

He came up close and said quietly,

'Get out of here, daddy, before we cut you up, and take your camera and your bus with you. And your bag too. Right?'

The one with the curving moustache spat and said quietly, 'Tourist.'

He got into the car beside his still unsmiling wife who was still staring straight ahead of her. The car gathered speed and made its way down the main street. In the mirror he could see the brown tenement diminishing. The thin stringy woman was still at the window looking out, screaming at the children.

The shops along both sides of the street were all changed. There used to be a road down to the river and the lavatories but he couldn't see anything there now. Later on he passed a new yellow petrol-station, behind a miniature park with a blue bench on it.

'Mind we used to take the bus out past here?' he said, looking towards the woods on their right, where all the secret shades were, and the squirrels leaped.

The sky was darkening and the light seemed concentrated ahead of them in steely rays.

Suddenly he said,

'I wish to God we were home.'

She smiled for the first time. But he was still thinking of the scarred tenement and of what he should have said to these youths. Punks. He should have said, 'This is my home too. More than yours. You're just passing through.'

Punks with Edwardian moustaches. By God, if they were in Africa they would be sorted out. A word in the ear of the Chief Inspector over a cigar and that would be it. By God, they knew how to deal with punks where he came from.

He thought of razor-suited Jamieson setting out on a Friday night in his lone battle with the Catholics. Where was he now? Used to be a boiler-man or something. By God, he would have sorted them out. And his wife used to clean the cinema steps on those big draughty winter days.

'So you admit you were wrong,' said his wife.

He drove on, accelerating past a smaller car and blaring his horn savagely. There was no space in this bloody country. Everybody crowded together like rats.

'Here, look at that,' he said, 'that didn't use to be there.' It was a big building, probably a hospital.

'Remember we used to come down here on the bus,' he said. 'That didn't use to be there.'

He drove into the small town and got out of the car to stretch. The yellow lights rayed the road and the cafés had red globes above them. He could hardly recognise the place.

'We'd better find a hotel,' he said.

His wife's face brightened.

They stopped at the Admiral and were back home when the boy in the blue uniform with the yellow edgings took their rich brown leather cases. People could be seen drinking in the bar which faced directly on to the street. They were standing about with globes of whisky in their hands. He recognised who they were. They had red faces and red necks, and they stood there decisively as if they belonged there. Their wives wore cool gowns and looked haggard and dissipated.

His own wife put her hand in his as they got out of the car. Now she was smiling and trailing her fur coat. She walked with a certain exaggerated delicacy. It looked as if it might be a good evening after all. He could tell the boys about his sentimental journey, it would make a good talking point, they would get some laughs from it. No, on second thoughts perhaps not. He'd say something about Scotland anyway, and not forget to make sure that they got to know how well he had done.

The two of them walked in. 'Waiter,' he said loudly, 'two whiskies with ice.' Some of them looked at him, then turned away again. That waiter should have his hair cut. After a few whiskies they would gravitate into the neighbourhood of the

others, those men who ran Scotland, the backbone of the nation. People like himself. By God, less than him. He had had the guts to travel.

Outside it was quite dark. Difficult to get used to this climate. His wife was smiling as if she expected someone to photograph her.

Now she was home. In a place much like Africa, the bar of a first class hotel.

He took out a cigar to show who he was, and began to cut it. In the lights pouring out from the hotel he could see his car bulging like a black wave.

He placed his hand over his wife's and said,
'Well, dear, it's been a tiring day.'

With a piercing stab of pain he recalled Africa, the drinkers on the verandah, the sky large and open and protective, the place where one knew where one was, among Europeans like oneself.

To have found one's true home was important after all. He sniffed his whisky, swirling it around in the goblet, golden and clear and thin and burningly pure.