VINTAGE

A TOWN LIKE ALICE

NEVIL SHUTE

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Jean Paget is just twenty years old and working in Malaya when the Japanese invasion begins. When she is captured she joins a group of other European women and children whom the Japanese force to march for miles through the jungle – an experience that leads to the deaths of many. Due to her courageous spirit and ability to speak Malay, Jean takes on the role of leader of the sorry gaggle of prisoners and many end up owing their lives to her indomitable spirit. While on the march, the group run into some Australian prisoners, one of whom, Joe Harman, helps them steal some food, and is horrifically punished by the Japanese as a result. After the war, Jean tracks Joe down in Australia and together they begin to dream of surmounting the past and transforming his one-horse outback town into a thriving community like Alice Springs …

About the Author

Nevil Shute Norway was born on 17 January 1899 in Ealing, London. After attending the Dragon School and Shrewsbury School, he studied Engineering Science at Balliol College, Oxford. He worked as an aeronautical engineer and published his first novel, *Marazan*, in 1926. In 1931 he married Frances Mary Heaton and they went on to have two daughters. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve where he worked on developing secret weapons. After the war he continued to write and settled in Australia where he lived until his death on 12 January 1960. His most celebrated novels include *Pied Piper* (1942), *No Highway* (1948), *A Town Like Alice* (1950) and *On the Beach* (1957).

Also by Nevil Shute

Novels

Marazan
So Disdained
Lonely Road
Ruined City
What Happened to the Corbetts
An Old Captivity
Landfall
Pied Piper
Pastoral
Most Secret
The Chequer Board
No Highway
Round the Bend
The Far Country
In the Wet
Requiem for a Wren
Beyond the Black Stump
On the Beach
The Rainbow and the Rose
Trustee from the Toolroom
Stephen Morris and *Pilotage*

Autobiography

Slide Rule

NEVIL SHUTE

A Town Like Alice

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Eric Lomax

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true;
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

W. B. Yeats

Introduction

This introduction contains details of the novel's plot

I was born in 1919. My father was senior staff manager at the Post Office in Edinburgh. Nevil Shute Norway's father was senior staff manager at the Post Office in London – which begins a series of coincidences linking my life story to that of Nevil Shute and his novel, *A Town Like Alice*.

When I was a schoolboy of around eight or nine years of age, my father started to take me out on Sunday morning walks often after church. These were almost statutory duties; they provided a chance to meet other father-and-son pairings and an opportunity for my mother to make progress with Sunday lunch. There was one special Sunday, which no-one who was alive at the time will ever forget: 5 October, 1930. As we approached a newspaper shop on the promenade at Portobello, the seaside suburb of Edinburgh, we were confronted by a placard which astounded everyone who saw it: 'R101 airship crashes on fire'. This may not seem particularly meaningful today, but that morning it seemed to me to mean the end of the world.

Two hundred miles to the south, at Howden in Humberside, a man about twenty years older than me was similarly frightened by this news. His name was Nevil Shute Norway and he was by then a senior engineering manager with the Airship Guarantee Company, engaged on

the construction of the R100, an airship almost identical to the R101.

The late 1920s were years of enterprise and optimism. Great ocean liners were being built in Europe, mainly for the trans-Atlantic services. The aviation world had decided there was no future for long-distance aeroplanes and had begin investing in airships.

Small boys followed these engineering developments very closely, often by collecting and making models. I myself, thanks to fairly enthusiastic parents, had my share of models, including a clockwork steamship, a clockwork railway, a tramcar and even a clockwork airship. Some of these I still have. It was, in fact, my enthusiasm for railways and electrical gadgets which got me into serious trouble many years later on the Burma-Siam Railway – generally regarded as the worst railway in the world.

From his earliest years, Nevil Shute Norway, like myself, had developed a great enthusiasm for aircraft, starting with model aeroplanes, followed by an engineering degree at Oxford University. In 1923 he commenced formal work with de Havillands in London and he also learned to fly. When the British Government commissioned two giant airship projects around 1924 Norway joined the team being assembled to design and build the R100 at Howden. He might easily have opted for the R101 team assembled at Cardington.

It was also around this time that Norway decided to complement his daytime job of aircraft design and manufacture with writing novels in the evenings. Partly to keep his two roles separate, he decided to use his full name for the aeronautical work and to pursue his literary career under the name of Nevil Shute. His first novel, *Marazan*, was published by Cassell in London in 1926, followed by *So Disdained* in 1928.

The summer of 1930 was an exciting time. In July and August the R100 airship made a spectacular and successful

flight from England to Montreal and back, with Nevil Shute Norway on board. Meanwhile there were technical and, worse still, political problems with the R101. Lord Thomson, the Air Minister, was desperate to get to India in October to show off the new airship, and despite warnings from the design and construction team, the airship set off from Cardington for Karachi on the night of 4 October 1930. Due to adverse weather later that night, the airship became unstable and crashed to the ground at Beauvais, France, catching fire on impact. Almost all the crew and passengers, including Lord Thomson, were killed. Airship work in England came to a complete standstill, never to be resumed. Norway and his colleagues were paid off and the R100, despite its success, was broken up for scrap.

Had Nevil Shute opted to join the construction team of the R101 instead of the R100, he might well have been lost in the crash. But while his aeronautical career suffered this setback, his literary career was blossoming. At a later point, he remarked that had he known how successful his novels were going to be, he would have given up his engineering career to concentrate on writing.

I began work at the Post Office in Edinburgh in 1936. I was swept into the army in 1939, and after various postings in India and elsewhere I arrived in Kuantan on the East Coast of Malaya early in December 1941. It was a beautiful place. I was in Kuantan when war broke out in the Far East; I heard the battle at sea which resulted in the loss of British warships, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*.

At the outbreak of war Nevil Shute Norway joined the Navy and spent most of the war years engaged upon secret Navy work in London, rising eventually to the rank of Lieutenant Commander RNVR. After leaving the Navy, he embarked on a programme of travel, including visits to the Far East and Australia. In the course of these travels he came across the amazing story of a group of eighty

European women who had been virtually abandoned by the Japanese army in Sumatra throughout the Japanese occupation. After marching about 1200 miles around Sumatra less than half had survived.

It is this remarkable exploit which forms the basis of the march by a group of English ladies around the north of Malaya, which is a key feature of *A Town Like Alice*, first published in 1950. I can confirm from experience how accurately Nevil Shute portrays the Japanese army during their occupation of Malaya, and its behaviour toward civilians and prisoners of war. I found the choice of Kuantan as a focal location for part of the story particularly appropriate. Reading it brings back some remarkable memories indeed.

The very clever story of *A Town Like Alice* starts, of all places, in Ayr, Scotland, but quickly retraces steps to the beginning of the Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1941 and 1942. The key figure is one Jean Paget, who becomes a civilian internee in the north of Malaya late in 1941. With a knowledge of the Malay language she finds herself taking charge of a group of English women and children who are made to walk across Malaya by the Japanese army. At Kuantan the group witnesses the crucifixion of an Australian POW, who had tried to assist the women with the provision of food. This savage form of execution was not unknown in the POW camps in the Far East. After continuing the march northwards the women finally settle for the last three years of the war in a village a little short of Kota Bharu, in the extreme north. There they discover that perhaps the Australian POW at Kuantan had not died after all.

But that is only half the tale. Jean Paget later travels to Australia in search of – guess who! This gives rise to a remarkable sequence of events, which ultimately results in success, after several near-misses, and the creation of a new town like Alice Springs.

The story is brilliant and must be read. There can be no other story which is so wide-ranging, beautifully written, and such a gentle Second World War love story.

Always critical of the commercial and technical enterprises being undertaken by the British civil service, Nevil Shute Norway moved permanently to Australia in 1950 and settled in Langwarrin, Victoria. He continued to write. By the time of his sudden death in 1960, after a series of heart problems, he had completed twenty-three novels. Throughout his writing, Nevil Shute introduced his aircraft, engineering and wartime experiences into his books. Undoubtedly, *A Town Like Alice* is the best and certainly the best known.

Eric Lomax, 2009

* * *

Eric Lomax was born in 1919. During the Second World War he was a Japanese prisoner-of war. Forced to work on the notorious Burma-Siam Railway, he was tortured by his captors for making a crude radio. He later told his story in The Railway Man, *which was published in 1995 to great acclaim and won the 1996 NCR Book Award. Eric Lomax lives in Berwick-upon-Tweed*.

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JAMES MACFADDEN DIED in March 1905 when he was forty-seven years old; he was riding in the Driffield Point-to-Point.

He left the bulk of his money to his son Douglas. The Macfaddens and the Dalhousies at that time lived in Perth, and Douglas was a school friend of Jock Dalhousie, who was a young man then, and had gone to London to become junior partner in a firm of solicitors in Chancery Lane, Owen, Dalhousie, and Peters. I am now the senior partner, and Owen and Dalhousie and Peters have been dead for many years, but I never changed the name of the firm.

It was natural that Douglas Macfadden should put his affairs into the hands of Jock Dalhousie, and Mr Dalhousie handled them personally till he died in 1928. In splitting up the work I took Mr Macfadden on to my list of clients, and forgot about him in the pressure of other matters.

It was not until 1935 that any business for him came up. I had a letter from him then, from an address in Ayr. He said that his brother-in-law, Arthur Paget, had been killed in a motor car accident in Malaya and so he wanted to redraft his will to make a trust in favour of his sister Jean and her two children. I am sorry to say that I was so ignorant of this client that I did not even know he was unmarried and had no issue of his own. He finished up by

saying that he was too unwell to travel down to London, and he suggested that perhaps a junior member of the firm might be sent up to see him and arrange the matter.

This fitted in with my arrangements fairly well, because when I got this letter I was just leaving for a fortnight's fishing holiday on Loch Shiel. I wrote and told him that I would visit him on my way south, and I put the file concerning his affairs in the bottom of my suitcase to study one evening during my vacation.

When I got to Ayr I took a room at the Station Hotel, because in our correspondence there had been no suggestion that he could put me up. I changed out of my plus-fours into a dark business suit, and went to call upon my client.

He did not live at all in the manner I had expected. I did not know much about his estate except that it was probably well over twenty thousand pounds, and I had expected to find my client living in a house with a servant or two. Instead, I discovered that he had a bedroom and a sitting-room on the same floor of a small private hotel just off the sea front. He was evidently leading the life of an invalid though he was hardly more than fifty years old at that time, ten years younger than I was myself. He was as frail as an old lady of eighty, and he had a peculiar grey look about him which didn't look at all good to me. All the windows of his sitting-room were shut and after the clean air of the lochs and moors I found his room stuffy and close; he had a number of budgerigars in cages in the window, and the smell of these birds made the room very unpleasant. It was clear from the furnishings that he had lived in that hotel and in that room for a good many years.

He told me something about his life as we discussed the will; he was quite affable, and pleased that I had been able to come to visit him myself. He seemed to be an educated man, though he spoke with a marked Scots accent. 'I live very quietly, Mr Strachan,' he said. 'My health will not

permit me to go far abroad. Whiles I get out upon the front on a fine day and sit for a time, and then again Maggie – that's the daughter of Mrs Doyle who keeps the house – Maggie wheels me out in the chair. They are very good to me here.'

Turning to the matter of the will, he told me that he had no close relatives at all except his sister, Jean Paget. 'Forbye my father might have left what you might call an indiscretion or two in Australia,' he said. 'I would not say that there might not be some of those about, though I have never met one, or corresponded. Jean told me once that my mother had been sore distressed. Women talk about these things, of course, and my father was a lusty type of man.'

His sister Jean had been an officer in the WAACs in the 1914–1918 War, and she had married a Captain Paget in the spring of 1917. 'It was not a very usual sort of marriage,' he said thoughtfully. 'You must remember that my sister Jean had never been out of Scotland till she joined the army, and the greater part of her life had been spent in Perth. Arthur Paget was an Englishman from Southampton, in Hampshire. I have nothing against Arthur, but we had all naturally thought that Jean would have married a Scot. Still, I would not say but it has been a happy marriage, or as happy as most.'

After the war was over Arthur Paget had got a job upon a rubber estate in Malaya somewhere near Taiping, and Jean, of course, went out there with him. From that time Douglas Macfadden had seen little of his sister; she had been home on leave in 1926 and again in 1932. She had two children, Donald born in 1918 and Jean born in 1921; these children had been left in England in 1932 to live with the Paget parents and to go to school in Southampton, while their mother returned to Malaya. My client had seen them only once, in 1932 when their mother brought them up to Scotland.

The present position was that Arthur Paget had been killed in a motor accident somewhere near Ipoh; he had been driving home at night from Kuala Lumpur and had driven off the road at a high speed and hit a tree. Probably he fell asleep. His widow, Jean Paget, was in England; she had come home a year or so before his death and she had taken a small house in Bassett just outside Southampton to make a home for the children and to be near their schools. It was a sensible arrangement, of course, but it seemed to me to be a pity that the brother and the sister could not have arranged to live nearer to each other. I fancy that my client regretted the distance that separated them, because he referred to it more than once.

He wanted to revise his will. His existing will was a very simple one, in which he left his entire estate to his sister Jean. ‘I would not alter that,’ he said. ‘But you must understand that Arthur Paget was alive when I made that will, and that in the nature of things I expected him to be alive when Jean inherited from me, and I expected that he would be there to guide her in matters of business. I shall not make old bones.’

He seemed to have a fixed idea that all women were unworldly creatures and incapable of looking after money; they were irresponsible, and at the mercy of any adventurer. Accordingly, although he wanted his sister to have the full use of his money after his death, he wanted to create a trust to ensure that her son Donald, at that time a schoolboy, should inherit the whole estate intact after his mother’s death. There was, of course, no special difficulty in that. I presented to him the various pros and cons of a trust such as he envisaged, and I reminded him that a small legacy to Mrs Doyle, in whose house he had lived for so many years, might not be out of place provided that he was still living with them at the time of his death. He agreed to that. He told me then that he had no close relations living, and he asked me if I would undertake to be the sole trustee

of his estate and the executor of his will. That is the sort of business a family solicitor frequently takes on his shoulders, of course. I told him that in view of my age he should appoint a co-trustee, and he agreed to the insertion of our junior partner, Mr Lester Robinson, to be co-trustee with me. He also agreed to a charging clause for our professional services in connection with the trust.

There only remained to tidy up the loose ends of what was, after all, a fairly simple will. I asked him what should happen if both he and his sister were to die before the boy Donald was twenty-one, and I suggested that the trust should terminate and the boy should inherit the estate absolutely when he reached his majority. He agreed to this, and I made another note upon my pad.

'Supposing then,' I said, 'that Donald should die before his mother, or if Donald and his mother should die in some way before you. The estate would then pass to the girl, Jean. Again, I take it that the trust would terminate when she reached her majority?'

'Ye mean,' he asked, 'when she became twenty-one?'

I nodded. 'Yes. That is what we decided in the case of her brother.'

He shook his head. 'I think that would be most imprudent, Mr Strachan, if I may say so. No lassie would be fit to administer her own estate when she was twenty-one. A lassie of that age is at the mercy of her sex, Mr Strachan, at the mercy of her sex. I would want the trust to continue for much longer than that. Till she was forty, at the very least.'

From various past experiences I could not help agreeing with him that twenty-one was a bit young for a girl to have absolute control over a large sum of money, but forty seemed to me to be excessively old. I stated my own view that twenty-five would be a reasonable age, and very reluctantly he receded to thirty-five. I could not move him from that position, and as he was obviously tiring and

growing irritable I accepted that as the maximum duration of our trust. It meant that in those very unlikely circumstances the trust would continue for twenty-one years from that date, since the girl Jean had been born in 1921 and it was then 1935. That finished our business and I left him and went back to London to draft out the will, which I sent to him for signature. I never saw my client again.

It was my fault that I lost touch with him. It had been my habit for a great many years to take my holiday in the spring, when I would go with my wife to Scotland for a fortnight's fishing, usually to Loch Shiel. I thought that this was going on for ever, as one does, and that next year I would call again upon this client on my way down from the north to see if there was any other business I could do for him. But things turn out differently, sometimes. In the winter of 1935 Lucy died. I don't want to dwell on that, but we had been married for twenty-seven years and – well, it was very painful. Both our sons were abroad, Harry in his submarine on the China station and Martin in his oil company at Basra. I hadn't the heart to go back to Loch Shiel, and I have never been to Scotland since. I had a sale and got rid of most of our furniture, and I sold our house on Wimbledon Common; one has to make an effort at a time like that, and a clean break. It's no good going on living in the ashes of a dead happiness.

I took a flat in Buckingham Gate opposite the Palace stables and just across the park from my club in Pall Mall. I furnished it with a few things out of the Wimbledon house and got a woman to come in and cook my breakfast and clean for me in the mornings, and here I set out to re-create my life. I knew the pattern well enough from the experience of others in the club. Breakfast in my flat. Walk through the Park and up the Strand to my office in Chancery Lane. Work all day, with a light lunch at my desk. To the club at six o'clock to read the periodicals, and

gossip, and dine, and after dinner a rubber of bridge. That is the routine that I fell into in the spring of 1936, and I am in it still.

All this, as I say, took my mind from Douglas Macfadden; with more than half my mind upon my own affairs I could only manage to attend to those clients who had urgent business with my office. And presently another interest grew upon me. It was quite obvious that war was coming, and some of us in the club who were too old for active military service began to get very interested in Air Raid Precautions. Cutting the long story short, Civil Defence as it came to be called absorbed the whole of my leisure for the next eight years. I became a Warden, and I was on duty in my district of Westminster all through the London blitz and the long, slow years of war that followed it. Practically all my staff went on service, and I had to run the office almost single-handed. In those years I never took a holiday, and I doubt if I slept more than five hours in any night. When finally peace came in 1945 my hair was white and my head shaky, and though I improved a little in the years that followed I had definitely joined the ranks of the old men.

One afternoon in January 1948 I got a telegram from Ayr. It read,

> Regret Mr Douglas Macfadden passed away last night please instruct re funeral.
>
> Doyle, Balmoral Hotel, Ayr.

I had to search my memory, I am afraid, to recollect through the war years who Mr Douglas Macfadden was, and then I had to turn to the file and the will to refresh my memory with the details of what had happened thirteen years before. It seemed rather odd to me that there was nobody at Ayr who could manage the funeral business. I put in a trunk call to Ayr right away and very soon I was speaking to Mrs Doyle. It was a bad line, but I understood

that she knew of no relations; apparently Mr Macfadden had had no visitors for a very long time. Clearly, I should have to go to Ayr myself, or else send somebody. I had no urgent engagements for the next two days and the matter seemed to be a little difficult. I had a talk with Lester Robinson, my partner, who had come back from the war as a brigadier, and cleared my desk, and took the sleeper up to Glasgow after dinner that night. In the morning I went down in a slow train to Ayr.

When I got to the Balmoral Hotel I found the landlord and his wife in mourning and obviously distressed; they had been fond of their queer lodger and it was probably due in a great part to their ministrations that he had lived so long. There was no mystery about the cause of death. I had a talk with the doctor and heard all about his trouble; the doctor had been with him at the end, for he lived only two doors away, and the death certificate was already signed. I took a brief look at the body for identification and went through the various formalities of death. It was all perfectly straightforward, except that there were no relations.

‘I doubt he had any,’ said Mr Doyle. ‘His sister used to write to him at one time, and she came to see him in 1938, I think it was. She lived in Southampton. But he’s had no letters except just a bill or two for the last two years.’

His wife said, ‘Surely, the sister died, didn’t she? Don’t you remember him telling us, sometime towards the end of the war?’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘So much was happening about that time. Maybe she did die.’

Relations or not, arrangements had to be made for the funeral, and I made them that afternoon. When that was done I settled down to look through the papers in his desk. One or two of the figures in an account book and on the back of the counterfoils of his cheque book made me open my eyes; clearly I should have to have a talk with the bank manager first thing next morning. I found a letter from his

sister dated in 1941 about the lease of her house. It threw no light, of course, upon her death, if she was dead, but it did reveal significant news about the children. Both of them were in Malaya at that time. The boy Donald, who must have been twenty-three years old at that time, was working on a rubber plantation near Kuala Selangor. His sister Jean had gone out to him in the winter of 1939, and was working in an office in Kuala Lumpur.

At about five o'clock I put in a trunk call to my office in London, standing in the cramped box of the hotel, and spoke to my partner. 'Look, Lester,' I said. 'I told you that there was some difficulty about the relations. I am completely at a loss up here, I'm sorry to say. Provisionally, I have arranged the funeral for the day after tomorrow, at two o'clock, at St Enoch's cemetery. The only relations that I know of live, or used to live, in Southampton. The sister, Mrs Arthur Paget, was living in 1941 at No 17 St Ronans Road, Bassett – that's just by Southampton somewhere. There were some other Paget relations in the district, the parents of Arthur Paget. Mrs Arthur Paget – her Christian name was Jean – yes, she was the deceased's sister. She had two children, Donald and Jean Paget, but they were both in Malaya in 1941. God knows what became of them. I wouldn't waste much time just now looking for them, but would you get Harris to do what he can to find some of these Southampton Pagets and tell them about the funeral? He'd better take the telephone book and talk to all the Pagets in Southampton one by one. I don't suppose there are so very many.'

Lester came on the telephone to me next morning just after I got back from the bank. 'I've nothing very definite, I'm afraid, Noel,' he said. 'I did discover one thing. Mrs Paget died in 1942, so she's out of it. She died of pneumonia through going out to the air raid shelter – Harris got that from the hospital. About the other Pagets, there are seven in the telephone directory and we've rung

them all up, and they're none of them anything to do with your family. But one of them, Mrs Eustace Paget, thinks the family you're looking for are the Edward Pagets, and that they moved to North Wales after the first Southampton blitz.'

'Any idea whereabouts in North Wales?' I asked.

'Not a clue,' he said. 'I think the only thing that you can do now is to proceed with the funeral.'

'I think it is,' I replied. 'But tell Harris to go on all the same, because apart from the funeral we've got to find the heirs. I've just been to the bank, and there is quite a sizeable estate. We're the trustees, you know.'

I spent the rest of that day packing up all personal belongings, and letters, and papers, to take down to my office. Furniture at that time was in short supply, and I arranged to store the furniture of the two rooms, since that might be wanted by the heirs. I gave the clothes to Mr Doyle to give away to needy people in Ayr. Only two of the budgerigars were left; I gave those to the Doyles, who seemed to be attached to them. Next morning I had another interview with the bank manager and telephoned to book my sleeper on the night mail down to London. And in the afternoon we buried Douglas Macfadden.

It was very cold and bleak and grey in the cemetery, that January afternoon. The only mourners were the Doyles, father, mother, and daughter, and myself, and I remember thinking that it was queer how little any of us knew about the man that we were burying. I had a great respect for the Doyle family by that time. They had been overwhelmed when I told them of the small legacy that Mr Macfadden had left them and at first they were genuinely unwilling to take it; they said that they had been well paid for his two rooms and board for many years, and anything else that they had done for him had been because they liked him. It was something, on that bitter January afternoon beside the grave, to feel that he had friends at the last ceremonies.

So that was the end of it, and I drove back with the Doyles and had tea with them in their sitting-room beside the kitchen. And after tea I left for Glasgow and the night train down to London, taking with me two suitcases of papers and small personal effects to be examined at my leisure if the tracing of the heir proved to be troublesome, and later to be handed over as a part of the inheritance.

In fact, he found the heir without much difficulty. Young Harris got a line on it within a week, and presently we got a letter from a Miss Agatha Paget, who was the headmistress of a girls' school in Colwyn Bay. She was a sister of Arthur Paget, who had been killed in the motor accident in Malaya. She confirmed that his wife, Jean, had died in Southampton in the year 1942, and she added the fresh information that the son, Donald, was also dead. He had been a prisoner of war in Malaya, and had died in captivity. Her niece, Jean, however, was alive and in the London district. The headmistress did not know her home address because she lived in rooms and had changed them once or twice, so she usually wrote to her addressing her letters to her firm. She was employed in the office of a concern called Pack and Levy Ltd, whose address was The Hyde, Perivale, London, NW.

I got this letter in the morning mail; I ran through the others and cleared them out of the way, and then picked up this one and read it again. Then I got my secretary to bring me the Macfadden box and I read the will through again, and went through some other papers and my notes on the estate. Finally I reached out for the telephone directory and looked up Pack and Levy Ltd, to find out what they did.

Presently I got up from my desk and stood for a time looking out of the window at the bleak, grey, January London street. I like to think a bit before taking any precipitate action. Then I turned and went through into Robinson's office; he was dictating, and I stood warming

myself at his fire till he had finished and the girl had left the room.

'I've got that Macfadden heir,' I said. 'I'll tell Harris.'

'All right,' he replied. 'You've found the son?'

'No,' I said. 'I've found the daughter. The son's dead.'

He laughed. 'Bad luck. That means we're trustees for the estate until she's thirty-five, doesn't it?'

I nodded.

'How old is she now?'

I calculated for a minute. 'Twenty-six or twenty-seven.'

'Old enough to make a packet of trouble for us.'

'I know.'

'Where is she? What's she doing?'

'She's employed as a clerk or typist with a firm of handbag manufacturers in Perivale,' I said. 'I'm just about to concoct a letter to her.'

He smiled. 'Fairy Godfather.'

'Exactly,' I replied.

I went back into my room and sat for some time thinking out that letter; it seemed to me to be important to set a formal tone when writing to this young woman for the first time. Finally I wrote,

DEAR MADAM

It is with regret that we have to inform you of the death of Mr Douglas Macfadden at Ayr on January 21st. As Executors to his will we have experienced some difficulty in tracing the beneficiaries, but if you are the daughter of Jean (*née* Macfadden) and Arthur Paget formerly resident in Southampton and in Malaya, it would appear that you may be entitled to a share in the estate.

May we ask you to telephone for an appointment to call upon us at your convenience to discuss the matter further? It will be necessary for you to produce evidence of identity at an early stage, such as your

birth certificate, National Registration Identity Card, and any other documents that may occur to you.

I am,
Yours truly,
for Owen, Dalhousie and Peters,
N.H. STRACHAN

She rang me up the next day. She had quite a pleasant voice, the voice of a well-trained secretary. She said, ‘Mr Strachan, this is Miss Jean Paget speaking. I’ve got your letter of the 29th. I wonder – do you work on Saturday mornings? I’m in a job, so Saturday would be the best day for me.’

I replied, ‘Oh, yes, we work on Saturday mornings. What time would be convenient for you?’

‘Should we say ten-thirty?’

I made a note upon my pad. ‘That’s all right. Have you got your birth certificate?’

‘Yes, I’ve got that. Another thing I’ve got is my mother’s marriage certificate, if that helps.’

I said, ‘Oh yes, bring that along. All right, Miss Paget, I shall look forward to meeting you on Saturday. Ask for me by name, Mr Noel Strachan. I am the senior partner.’

She was shown into my office punctually at ten-thirty on Saturday. She was a girl or woman of a medium height, dark-haired. She was good-looking in a quiet way; she had a tranquillity about her that I find it difficult to describe except by saying that it was the grace that you see frequently in women of a Scottish descent. She was dressed in a dark blue coat and skirt. I got up and shook hands with her, and gave her the chair in front of my desk, and went round and sat down myself. I had the papers ready.

‘Well, Miss Paget,’ I said. ‘I heard about you from your aunt – I think she is your aunt? Miss Agatha Paget, at Colwyn Bay.’

She inclined her head. ‘Aunt Aggie wrote and told me that she had had a letter from you. Yes, she’s my aunt.’

‘And I take it that you are the daughter of Arthur and Jean Paget, who lived in Southampton and Malaya?’

She nodded. ‘That’s right. I’ve got the birth certificate and mother’s birth certificate, as well as her marriage certificate.’ She took them from her bag and put them on my desk, with her identity card.

I opened these documents and read them through carefully. There was no doubt about it; she was the person I was looking for. I leaned back in my chair presently and took off my spectacles. ‘Tell me, Miss Paget,’ I said. ‘Did you ever meet your uncle, who died recently? Mr Douglas Macfadden?’

She hesitated. ‘I’ve been thinking about that a lot,’ she said candidly. ‘I couldn’t honestly swear that I have ever met him, but I think it must have been him that my mother took me to see once in Scotland, when I was about ten years old. We all went together, Mother and I and Donald. I remember an old man in a very stuffy room with a lot of birds in cages. I think that was Uncle Douglas, but I’m not quite sure.’

That fitted in with what he had told me, the visit of his sister with her children in 1932. This girl would have been eleven years old then. ‘Tell me about your brother Donald, Miss Paget,’ I asked. ‘Is he still alive?’

She shook her head. ‘He died in 1943, while he was a prisoner. He was taken by the Japs in Singapore when we surrendered, and then he was sent to the railway.’

I was puzzled. ‘The railway?’

She looked at me coolly, and I thought I saw tolerance for the ignorance of those who stayed in England in her glance. ‘The railway that the Japs built with Asiatic and prisoner-of-war labour between Siam and Burma. One man died for every sleeper that was laid, and it was about two hundred miles long. Donald was one of them.’

There was a little pause. ‘I am so sorry,’ I said at last. ‘One thing I have to ask you, I am afraid. Was there a death certificate?’

She stared at me. ‘I shouldn’t think so.’

‘Oh …’ I leaned back in my chair and took up the will. ‘This is the will of Mr Douglas Macfadden,’ I said. ‘I have a copy for you, Miss Paget, but I think I’d better tell you what it contains in ordinary, non-legal language. Your uncle made two small bequests. The whole of the residue of the estate was left in trust for your brother Donald. The terms of the trust were to the effect that your mother was to enjoy the income from the trust until her death. If she died before your brother attained his majority, the trust was to continue until he was twenty-one, when he would inherit absolutely and the trust would be discharged. If your brother died before inheriting, then you were to inherit the residuary estate after your mother’s time, but in that event the trust was to continue till the year 1956, when you would be thirty-five years old. You will appreciate that it is necessary for us to obtain legal evidence of your brother’s death.’

She hesitated, and then she said, ‘Mr Strachan, I’m afraid I’m terribly stupid. I understand you want some proof that Donald is dead. But after that is done, do you mean that I inherit everything that Uncle Douglas left?’

‘Broadly speaking – yes,’ I replied. ‘You would only receive the income from the estate until the year 1956. After that, the capital would be yours to do what you like with.’

‘How much did he leave?’

I picked up a slip of paper from the documents before me and ran my eye down the figures for a final check. ‘After paying death duties and legacies,’ I said carefully, ‘the residuary estate would be worth about fifty-three thousand pounds at present-day prices. I must make it clear that that is at present-day prices, Miss Paget. You must not assume

that you would inherit that sum in 1956. A falling stock market affects even trustee securities.'

She stared at me. 'Fifty-three thousand pounds?'

I nodded. 'That seems to be about the figure.'

'How much a year would that amount of capital yield, Mr Strachan?'

I glanced at the figures on the slip before me. 'Invested in trustee stocks, as at present – about £1550 a year, gross income. Then income tax has to be deducted. You would have about nine hundred a year to spend, Miss Paget.'

'Oh …' There was a long silence; she sat staring at the desk in front of her. Then she looked up at me, and smiled. 'It takes a bit of getting used to,' she remarked. 'I mean, I've always worked for my living, Mr Strachan. I've never thought that I'd do anything else unless I married, and that's only a different sort of work. But this means that I need never work again – unless I want to.'

She had hit the nail on the head with her last sentence. 'That's exactly it,' I replied. 'Unless you want to.'

'I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have to go to the office,' she said. 'I haven't got any other life …'

'Then I should go on going to the office,' I observed.

She laughed. 'I suppose that's the only thing to do.'

I leaned back in my chair. 'I'm an old man now, Miss Paget. I've made plenty of mistakes in my time and I've learned one thing from them, that it's never very wise to do anything in a great hurry. I take it that this legacy will mean a considerable change in your circumstances. If I may offer my advice, I should continue in your present employment for the time, at any rate, and I should refrain from talking about your legacy in the office just yet. For one thing, it will be some months before you get possession even of the income from the estate. First we have to obtain legal proof of the death of your brother, and then we have to obtain the confirmation of the executors in Scotland and realize a portion of the securities to meet estate and

succession duties. Tell me, what are you doing with this firm Pack and Levy?'

'I'm a shorthand typist,' she said. 'I'm working now as secretary to Mr Pack.'

'Where do you live, Miss Paget?'

She said, 'I've got a bed-sitting-room at No 43 Campion Road, just off Ealing Common. It's quite convenient, but of course I have a lot of my meals out. There's a Lyons just round the corner.'

I thought for a minute. 'Have you got many friends in Ealing? How long have you been there?'

'I don't know very many people,' she replied. 'One or two families, people who work in the firm, you know. I've been there over two years now, ever since I was repatriated. I was out in Malaya, you know, Mr Strachan, and I was a sort of prisoner of war for three and a half years. Then when I got home I got this job with Pack and Levy.'

I made a note of her address upon my pad. 'Well, Miss Paget,' I said, 'I should go on just as usual for the time being. I will consult the War Office on Monday morning and obtain this evidence about your brother as quickly as I can. Tell me his name, and number, and unit.' She did so, and I wrote them down. 'As soon as I get that, I shall submit the will for probate. When that is proved, then the trust commences and continues till the year 1956, when you will inherit absolutely.'

She looked up at me. 'Tell me about this trust,' she asked. 'I'm afraid I'm not very good at legal matters.'

I nodded. 'Of course not. Well, you'll find it all in legal language in the copy of the will which I shall give you, but what it means is this, Miss Paget. Your uncle, when he made this will, had a very poor opinion of the ability of women to manage their own money. I'm sorry to have to say such a thing, but it is better for you to know the whole of the facts.'

She laughed. ‘Please don’t apologize for him, Mr Strachan. Go on.’

‘At first, he was quite unwilling that you should inherit the capital of the estate till you were forty years old,’ I said. ‘I contested that view, but I was unable to get him to agree to any less period than the present arrangement in the will. Now, the object of a trust is this. The testator appoints trustees – in this case, myself and my partner – who undertake to do their best to preserve the capital intact and hand it over to the legatee – to you – when the trust expires.’

‘I see. Uncle Douglas was afraid that I might spend the fifty-three thousand all at once.’

I nodded. ‘That was in his mind. He did not know you, of course, Miss Paget, so there was nothing personal about it. He felt that in general women were less fit than men to handle large sums of money at an early age.’

She said quietly, ‘He may have been right.’ She thought for a minute, and then she said, ‘So you’re going to look after the money for me till I’m thirty-five and give me the interest to spend in the meantime? Nine hundred a year?’

‘If you wish us to conduct your income-tax affairs for you, that would be about the figure,’ I said. ‘We can arrange the payments in any way that you prefer, as a quarterly or a monthly cheque, for example. You would get a formal statement of account half-yearly.’

She asked curiously, ‘How do you get paid for doing all this for me, Mr Strachan?’

I smiled. ‘That is a very prudent question, Miss Paget. You will find a clause in the will, No 8, I think, which entitles us to charge for our professional services against the income from the trust. Of course, if you get into any legal trouble we should be glad to act for you and help you in any way we could. In that case we should charge you on the normal scale of fees.’