VINTAGE

THE TEMPLE OF OPTIMISM

JAMES FLEMING

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About the Book

Famously, Jane Austen created a fictional universe for ‘three or four families in a country village’. In this remarkable first novel James Fleming achieves something very similar: out of the relationships of two men and one woman in Derbyshire in 1788 he has created a fiction that bears comparison with the great novelists of the nineteenth century. Anthony Apreece covets the land of his young neighbour, Edward Horne. Edward covets Daisy, Anthony’s wife. On such simple foundations, James Fleming builds a novel of extraordinary richness, at once a wholly convincing representation of an eighteenth-century world and an utterly modern dissection of two of mankind’s most powerful passions: greed and love.

About the Author

James Fleming was born in 1944, of a famous literary family that has produced Ian, the creator of James Bond, and Peter, the travel writer and essayist. He lives in Gloucestershire and writes in Caithness.

The Temple of Optimism

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VINTAGE BOOKS
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One

GREY BOLSTERS OF cloud rolled across the sky, their bellies tinged with pink. Like elephants, he thought, or Daphne Cuthbert's jowls. He leaned a little further out of bed. Everywhere it was the same, from one horizon to the other. He scratched his ribs. So today was to be no different at Winterbourne from any other in this strange month of June 1771. Wise men would wear a hat in the certainty of rain, fools would not, and both would be right. The cattle would stare silently into the river Eve and the leaves hang flabby and moist. The smallest noise would travel for miles. Everything would be middling and dull. It was not at all the weather that Nathaniel Home was used to among the hills of Derbyshire.

He crossed his hands over his plump, furry stomach and lay back twiddling his thumbs. The conversation of birds going about their vital, early-morning business, the distant noises from the stables, the rumbles from the kitchen area, all were congenial to him. He liked to be where things happened. Movement of any sort was attractive to his impatient, capricious mind. He was a person in whom the sight of a fresh hole in the ground excited the same rustle of anticipation as the words *Terra Incognita!* evoke in an inveterate explorer. 'Ah,' he would say, peering down – or up, or along; at any rate fixing his brown and marvelling eye to what he pronounced as the arperture and fiddling inside it with his stick – 'can it be that the mole still sleepeth, and that the lion roareth not?', or 'Doth Mrs Brock snore while Adam delves?', or any one of a number of homely biblicisms that he had composed out of an instinctive sympathy for the

animal kingdom. A hole in which one of his men was working attracted him as surely as a catapult a schoolboy, for it combined the best of both worlds: an underground mystery and the chance for a pow-wow. Hard on the heels of why? would follow an amiable inquisition about the man's health, his wife's sores, the ease of digging, the composition of the soil and then, more likely than not, some loosely tangential anecdote that had happened, as they conversed, to bound fully accoutred into his fructuous brain.

Anything concerning drainage was a source of endless fascination to him. To watch the deep square drain in the stableyard being unblocked left him with a sense of total fulfilment. As Amos Paxton, his steward, poured in a bucket of water at the top, he'd scamper on his chubby legs to its mouth in the orchard to see it cleanse. 'Exemplary,' he'd chortle, dashing his hat against his knee. Or 'That'll let the air in, eh lads!' jabbing with the tip of his cane at the flotilla of horse turds that bobbled like rotten apples beneath his fleshy nose. In this respect, as in many others, Nat Home had retained into middle age a pleasing sort of childishness.

His favourite expressions were mudgy me, by Jove and by Jupiter. Some of his friends even called him Jupiter Home to his face. But he was never disconcerted or thought they presumed too far. He just grinned and pronounced himself extraordinarily flattered.

He clasped his hands behind his head and smiled the reposeful smile of a man content with his lot and having before him the prospect of an agreeable day doing nothing urgent.

In point of fact he had never done anything urgent throughout his fifty years, unless one excepts the vicarious urgency that is involved in riding a horse flat out in the name of vulpicide. It was merely the impression that he gave. His entire manner proclaimed the end of time if the blacksmith had not finished shoeing the oxen by such-and-such an hour, or the fleeces been bagged by noon. But he

never meant it. It was the way he was, sea water without brine.

To matters of domestic economy he was indifferent. In the mornings he would breakfast by himself, for preference off a snipe and a poached egg, his small jaws agitating rapidly as he considered his day. After a conference with Paxton, he'd perch himself jovially atop Pilot, the towering grey gelding that he'd bought principally for its name, and set out to inspect his projects, aflood with bustle and enthusiasm, proposing this and belaying the other: exhorting, interfering and contradicting himself but always with such good humour and absence of condescension that not one person on Winterbourne estate ever thought the less of him. 'It's the master's way, it can't be helped,' his men would say as they shifted a hundred drainage pegs eighteen inches to the left. No one could take against an employer with a face that glowed like a conker and such a cheery way of carrying on.

At midday he would return for a slice of cold pie. Perhaps he would then have a nap, curled up on the sofa. And perhaps he would not. It all depended on the events of the morning. For instance, the trill of a skylark wavering above the moors might inspire him to enumerate all the birds that sang as they flew. Then nothing would satisfy him until he had established whether the plink of a blackbird as it flitted from bush to bush was from pleasure (which made it eligible) – or from alarm (which disqualified it). Or it might occur to him as he inspected the stables to make a pet out of a bat. (Thus, in fact, did he once spend an entire summer and so greatly amused his neighbours until, at a dinner the Cuthberts were giving for the bishop, he produced it from his pocket and invited the company to observe its appetite for liver.) Or he might be overtaken by a desire to devise a mechanism for quantifying the flow of water from a well. Or for weeks be heard trying to measure in a certain hollow the distance required for the perfect reflection of one syllable of echo. (In 1768 he described the results in a paper he read at

the Assembly Room in town. But since he got carried away by the excitement of it all as he ran up and down the stage shouting ‘Pantaloon’, which was his test word, no one was able to hear his conclusion – 105 feet a syllable – and he had to go round later repeating this nugget.)

These were what he termed his Private Enquiries, as distinct from his morning labours which he classed as Agriculturalism.

At four p.m. Digworth smote the gong, first in the hall with three stately taps of a pro-forma nature and then, should his master not appear, on a valorous thumping circuit of the terrace, crying out between each series of blows, ‘Cutlets today, Mr Home, beetroot soup, kidneys, suet pudding . . .’ This was the summons for the main meal of the day for Nat and his wife, Lady Blanche.

Afterwards he surrendered himself to the duties of a husband. Once a week in the winter he would take the trap into Buxton and partner his friend Major Seddon, late of the Fencible Regiment, in a rubber or two of whist. It was a game that he played noisily and with sly skill. Sometimes in the summer he’d go with his terrier and his fishing rod for a walk beside the little river Eve. But these, it was clearly understood between them, were concessions by Blanche.

Fox-hunting in its season had been a favourite pastime until he had fallen out with the owner of the hounds, his neighbour at Overmoor.

Blanche was of a less brisk disposition and especially so before her morning cup of chocolate. No one was more aware of this than Nat after twenty-three years of marriage. And since he loved her (he looked down fondly to where she lay beside him, her knees drawn up towards her chest and her head half-hidden by the covers), he adhered loyally to the terms of their truce: that so long as he did not move or speak before Digworth brought up his hot water, he was free of all obligations towards her (except on Sundays, holy days

and when they had callers) up to the moment the four o’clock gong struck.

So on this morning as on others he lay by her side and waited, quivering, for the crackle of Digworth’s catarrh in his dressing-room. It occurred to him that he might have Digworth shave him in the afternoon. Was it today the Scarletts were coming, or was it on Thursday? And was there actually a difference between one day and the next? Time should be treated like dough, he thought, and chopped up to suit one’s needs and not according to some fusty convention.

He wiggled his toes and watched a spider with an oval, putty-coloured body tiptoe up the bed-curtains. By Jove but he’d been lucky to snare a wealthy wife! He traced with a fingernail the twist of gold thread that spiralled through the blue-grey bed-curtains. By Jove yes, that’d been a stroke of unmitigated good fortune finding himself acceptable to a peer’s daughter. Not that he’d been out tuft-hunting, mind you. Absolutely not. It had been from the first a marriage of love as far as he was concerned. Well, perhaps unmitigated was an exaggeration. Blanche’s marriage portion had made a difference. One had to be candid about it. It had allowed him to do all sorts of things at Winterbourne that he could never have managed from his own resources. But it had added to their union a *couleur* that he sometimes regretted. It was a matter of pride, really.

A lock of dark hair had escaped from her nightcap and settled laxly across her thin cheek. When they were married they’d laughed at the contrast between her cap, which invariably greeted the morning as neat as new, and his, which when it could be found at all, had the appearance of having been savaged by a mastiff during the night. But that had been years ago. Before Edward was born. Before laughter became less plentiful.

He picked his nose and started to fidget. He crooked a finger round the hem of the bed-curtains and again

examined the sky. The fish bellies were losing their lustre and the clouds congealing into one huge canopy the colour of lava. Invisible in the depths of the horse chestnut tree that grew on the edge of the lawn, two wood pigeons gurgled to each other as they brazened and strutted amidst the foliage. He heard the skeek of a kestrel a long way off. He heard Digworth shuffling around in his dressing-room. His eyes lit up. There was a tap on the door. It was enough – and with a haroosh of the covers he plunged through the bed-curtains like an opera singer who hears five hundred voices baying for an encore. Within seconds he was shouting down the stairwell for his chocolate, his breakfast, Amos Paxton, his hat, horse, dog, the gardeners: in short, for everyone and everything that his imagination had listed as imperative for his enjoyment of the day. And when no one responded, he set off for the nether regions of his large and crumbling mansion with his nightshirt billowing round his little legs and his slipper heels cracking on the stair treads.

Blanche, who had been awake for a good hour but had not wished to advertise the fact, uncoiled herself and flung an arm across her eyes. At a distance that was altogether insufficient, she listened to doors slamming, the joyful yelps of Trump, the rumble of Paxton's voice and the clatter of something dropped on stone flags. To Nat talking nonsense to Trump as he climbed back up the stairs. To Nat washing, Nat singing, the window being lifted, to Nat addressing the weather as if he were Harry Hotspur on the eve of battle. Had it ever been otherwise?

She laid a finger across her lower lip and pressed it against the gum. Yes, that night three years ago when it had been so cold that he'd had to get up twice to bank the fire. Had stolen every one of the blankets. Had lain doggo even when Digworth brought up his water and eventually, as quiet as a mouse, had disappeared to return carrying the thermometer in his gloved hands.

‘Look at it, my dear,’ he had said in a voice of awe, ‘fourteen degrees of frost in the kitchen larder, in the *kitchen larder* would you believe.’ Then he’d put the thermometer in the bed, jumped in after it and for the next hour (in fact until 32ºF was achieved) informed her with sepulchral glee of the upward progress of the mercury.

It had been, she decided, the only day of their married life that had commenced without a fanfare. Was it impossible for him to do anything quietly? Did he have to attack every hour as if it were his last? Frankly she was sick of it. There were times when she couldn’t have cared twopence if he and Edward and these great barracks they lived in all flew off to the moon. She had been faithful to him, faithful, dutiful and sharing. She had fulfilled the most painful and humiliating obligation of a wife by giving birth to the tiresome Edward, and she felt she was owed something in return.

She had never disguised from him her contempt for their neighbours. She had never for a moment pretended she felt other than she did about the discomforts of Winterbourne from the day he had brought her there as his bride and their carriage got stuck on the moor. Once, on a bitter February evening when the draughts coming under the door had made even the carpets shiver, she had taken off her mittens and shown him her chilblains. She had looked him squarely in the eye and said she could not tolerate another winter in the place. They must buy a town house in London: nothing excessive, just so long as it had some decent rooms where she could entertain her friends. But she had known immediately it was hopeless. His face had puckered like that of a child whose kite has lodged in a tree. ‘You mean, go to town just as the fun is starting here? No hunting or duck shooting? I couldn’t do that. Go to London for the winter? I’d sooner die.’ So she had desisted. If it meant choosing between London and Nat, at the end of the day she’d rather have Nat.

It was not, she thought as she shook out her long black tresses, that he was a scoundrel. He did not beat her, ignore her or patronise her. When he needed her money (which was whenever he called her his little treasure), he was civil and, so far as she could tell, truthful. He did not gamble for anything more than a few pennies when he went off to play whist. He was not a rake. He was still handsome and, in his own fashion, charming. No, on not one point of his externals had she any right to complain. The real problem was that a little of him went a long way. He was everywhere at once. To reflect was unthinkable, to idle anathema. No sanctuary existed that was completely free of his Jack-in-the-box personality. Total strangers became his best friends at the drop of a hat and with their retinues would invade Winterbourne for weeks on end, filling the house with their nonsense and denying her a moment's peace. He was, she knew, the most exhausting man on the planet.

'Help yourselves,' he'd boom, his brown eyes sparkling as the newest troupe spilled into the hall with their dogs and children and without an instant's hesitation began, like gold miners, to drive home their pegs in this adventitious El Dorado. 'Only two things you need to know at Winterbourne: grog's in the cupboard that way, the necessary place in the cupboard *that* way. All that's mine is yours. Stay the winter if you can, the duck'll give capital sport by and by. Her ladyship'll be delighted, won't you, my ruby?' And then with absolutely no concept of propriety, not even a flicker of *comme il faut*, he'd give her waist a blustery squeeze in exactly the same way as he did to Cook on her birthday. It was embarrassing beyond words. She deserved better.

'Your coat, Mr Home, don't go forgetting your coat now. It'll likely rain before the day's out.'

'Blast it! Oh very well, Digworth, if you insist. Come on then, Packy, time we were off.'

Footsteps crunched through the gravel towards her window. So, they were on their way, Nat and his faithful

Paxton, to make their customary tour of all his little projects. That's what he was, a dabbler: a noisy, bumbling dabbler. She heard him say something about having the windows reputtied. The footsteps stopped. She knew they were inspecting the sills. Nat whistled philosophically through his teeth. Then the gravel stirred as they set off again. No wonder he had insisted on having gravelled paths instead of slabbing them down as others did. Nothing silent could ever happen in gravel. Perhaps she should suggest they replace the drawing-room carpets with beds of gravel so he could march up and down having conversations with it and never disturb her.

'Tom Glossipp came to see me last night,' Amos was saying. 'Asked if we'd be counting the lambs soon.'

'Why ever did he want to know that?'

'Pardon me saying so, Mr Home, but he did the lambing again for us this spring, if you remember.'

Nat struck his forehead with the flat of his palm. She heard it plainly.

'Bless me, so he did! Memory's like a sieve these days. Of course he did! Good lad, Tom. Nice and gentle with his hands. Can't think what we'd do without him. Tell me, Packy, did we agree to pay him by the lamb or, ahem, for *le tout* lambing, if you follow me.' (They halted directly below her window.)

'By the lamb, sir. A farthing for every lamb living at June 1st and as the day's passed and he's seemingly got a need for the money –'

'Trump! Trump!' Nat's roar seemed to emanate from under her very bed. 'What the devil d'ye think you're doing rolling in that shite, you scabby little muck-worm, you. Come into heel this instant, d'ye hear me?' His voice faded to a purr. She heard him click his fingers and imagined the creature fawning at his boots with a besotted look in its eyes. And then he'd bring it into the house with him and let it jump on

the sofa so that the servants would have to clean everything. God, but he knew how to try a woman.

‘Very well then, Packy, we’ll ride out to Britannia in the afternoon and count our way home. Tra-la-la, tra-la-lee, la, la-la lee. Now I was thinking last night . . .’

They rounded the corner of the house and made off into the pleasure grounds. Soon only the sound of his distant rallies with the gardeners remained to displease her. She picked up her rosewood hand mirror and, as she waited for Margaret to bring in her chocolate, arranged her hair in girlish licks across her forehead.

‘Will there be anything further, my lady?’ Margaret asked later, putting down the nail scissors. Blanche considered. She must speak to Mrs Croft about provisions. Her sewing basket needed a good clear-out. She really should go to the schoolroom and see how Edward was faring with his new tutor, the beetle-browed Mr Dryce, MA. There were flowers to be cut if they were dry enough. Then she might read until Nat returned for his midday repast. If he did. A few pages of *Pamela* would divert her. But there was another thing –

Though generally speaking immune to intellectual effort, Nat had recently discovered the pleasures, if she could use that word, of *Tristram Shandy*. ‘I say, little ruby,’ he’d chirrup of an evening, uncrossing his legs, removing his spectacles and as usual interrupting her without any consideration for anyone but himself, ‘this fellow’s extraordinarily droll for a parson. Wish we had more like him. Just listen to this, will you? What’s happened is that Uncle Toby’s had a misadventure. Mind you, we can’t be sure but that’s how it looks –’ and then he’d read out the most frightful whimsy, bouncing round in his chair, pinching his nostrils and shrieking with laughter like a drunkard as the tears rolled down his cheeks. There was one passage in the book that had particularly caught his fancy. Somewhere in one of Shandy’s interminable digressions, it was remarked by – she forgot whom – that of all the pleasures of

bachelordom, the freedom to sleep diagonally across one's own bed was among the greatest. 'The majesty of genius,' he said wistfully, 'only an original could have put his finger on it so unerringly,' and when she retorted indignantly, but wasn't that what he did anyway, he responded, 'Oh surely not. I lie as straight as a cucumber.' But it was true! He slept like an octopus! Arms and legs all over the place, grunting, groaning, twisting, nudging and kicking at her until she was consigned to an outpost no wider than a sandbank. And so it went on. If she was really unlucky, he'd lean forward and tap her on the knee and say, 'Oh I *must* read that to you again, isn't he the funniest parson you ever did hear of?'

Once she had thought to humour him by reading a chapter for herself. But she had soon desisted, thinking to herself, why do I need to be any further acquainted with Mr Shandy when I have him living in the house with me already?

This thought put her off the idea of reading. She decided instead she would check the linen press after seeing Edward, and so instructed Margaret to meet her there with the housemaids at eleven. Then she scrutinised her fingernails down her long nose and slid angularly into the chemise Margaret was holding for her.

Two

GLAZED AND GELID by winter, brightly purling in the summer months between walls of yellow irises and frothy, clean-scented cow-parsley, the little river Eve formed the spine to the body of Winterbourne. Its head lay in the numerous springs that rose in the oval of hills behind the village. Sweetly clear, the fingerlets rushed down the woody slopes and were united in a short gorge, from which the stream debouched over a shelf of rock into a deep round pool of translucent green. At the tail of the pool was a cattle ford. About twenty yards below this stood the wooden cantilevered bridge that carried the road from outside over the Eve and up a steepish incline into the hamlet of Winterbourne, where it stopped. Its energy spent, the river then sauntered through a green vale shaped like the fanned tail of a courting bird.

At the broad end of the tail it ran through a number of rushy pastures that were called the Out Ground. These abutted the moorland. At this point, where the Eve met a ledge of hard rock, it turned abruptly to the right. Here the water backed up during winter floods to form a considerable lagoon which, because of the unceasing movement of the river, froze but rarely. As soon as their usual haunts iced over, ducks and waders of all sorts came in their hundreds to feed at the Rushes, as the marsh was known.

From June onwards all the old women and children from the nearby villages descended on the place to harvest the rushes for their winter lights. It was a sight to see them cross-legged in their family groups, fingers and tongues going nineteen to the dozen as they nimbly peeled the

rushes in such a way as to leave only one narrow rib from top to bottom to support the pith. Often enough Nat had tried his hand at it, but he was too clumsy and so ended up by making himself comfortable in the midst of their pleasant chatter, which was perhaps what he'd had in mind all along.

Beyond the Rushes lay the moor with its mixture of heather and sweet summer grasses, and the lichen-covered ruins of Britannia.

None could say with assurance why they bore this name or the purpose they had once served. According to local lore (which is to say, according to Amos Paxton), it had been in ancient times a shelter and trysting point for the cattle herds, since it was here that the road out of Winterbourne joined the old droving way into Buxton. But whatever the reason, it was a convenient landmark for the tinkers and packmen and all who still used the moorland road. Many was the picnic Nat had had there as a child. Everyone knew where Britannia was.

At the root of the tail and therefore looking down the vale towards Britannia, was Winterbourne. It consisted of seven cottages, one built of stone and the rest of thatch over wattle. In these lived Walter Hamilton the blacksmith, Moley Dibdin the jolly trapper of eponyms, Tom Glossipp, a pensioner, and Nathaniel Home's other employees. At harvest time and haymaking (which on his poor soil did not make a large noise), a gang of workers and their families came out from Buxton to help in the fields. Amos Paxton occupied the stone cottage. It was neat and square like its garden, and situated next to the corn mill. The millstones were turned by water carried in an open ditch from the Eve. It was one of Amos's principal duties to oversee this vital operation. Around lay in a jumble the rest of Nat's grey-slated, dilapidated farm buildings: granary, cattle sheds, the smithy, stabling for the plough teams and miscellaneous hovels for dogs, chickens, geese, implements and all the what-have-you of an agricultural undertaking. The

remainder of the cottages fronted in a row on to the lane leading out of the village to the rectory and the church.

The advowson to the living was held by Nat. Only once had he been called upon to exercise it, many years ago when the existing incumbent, the Reverend Percival Hughes, had been inducted.

On a rocky outcrop above the village, and so dominating it wholly, was Winterbourne House and its terraced gardens. It was reached by a steep rough road running through a grove of yew trees which had been planted by Nat's father. It was this man who had also erected, at a short distance from the house and with the last of his fortune, a handsome range of stables for the family's carriages and riding horses. His portrait, darkened by smoke, hung above the fireplace in the hall. It depicted a taller and sterner version of Nat standing in a brown velvet suit and pointing with authority at the new stables. Besides one gleaming, spurless boot sat dutifully the great-great-grandmother of Trump. Her name, Hilda, had been artfully woven into the roots of the tussock upon which her haunches rested, but by now this could be verified only by the use of a ladder and candle.

Behind Winterbourne the land lay quite differently. For at a bowshot or so from the village it soared dramatically upwards into a rugged horseshoe of hills across which spread a beech wood of imperial beauty, the purest emerald in May and all hues of gold and fox-pelt bronze in the mists of autumn. On the further side of this range, the ground fell gently away through bracken and rough cattle grazing until it reached the Buxton to Derby turnpike. From Britannia to the highway the land belonged exclusively to Nat Home. It was an area of a fraction less than three thousand acres and so offered him ample scope for pootling.

It was after two o'clock when they arrived at Britannia. Amos Paxton was a thick, square-shouldered man of forty-five. His forearms were like logs and each blunt-nailed finger as solid as a spigot. He had an honest, open face, a rather

wedge-shaped nose and eyes the blue of cornflowers. Rarely was he seen without a mouse-grey felt hat squashed on top of his prominent ears. He and his wife Mary had one living child, a son called Davie.

All his life Amos had spent at Winterbourne. He knew as well as he knew his own name which fields gave an early bite in April, the hollows where the ground lay wet and clogged the bush harrows, and the most intimate foibles of the milking cows. He could judge without leaving his bed whether the Eve had flooded the Britannia road. The position of every rotten floorboard in the corn loft was imprinted on his mind like a map. The run of the drains, the number of cartloads to empty the dung yard, the volume of flour required each week in the kitchens, the width of every gateway to an inch – of all these details, which are so vital to the easy operation of an estate like Winterbourne, Amos Paxton was the absolute master. Practical, phlegmatic and conscientious, he was the perfect foil to Nat Home. No worldly ambitions corrupted his sleep. So long as he could serve the family that had employed him and his father and his grandfather, and could each winter find enough straight stems in the hazel coppice to work up into the intricately carved walking sticks for which he was justly famous, his soul was at peace. Winterbourne was his life. As it was for Nat, so it was for him. And for this reason they had grown more than usually fond of each other over the years.

A hundred yards short of Britannia, Home reined in. Around him the track and the soft peaty ground to either side were pitted and scored with ruts.

‘See how deep the doctor went in,’ he said, pointing downwards, ‘and it’s only a little piss-pot affair he has for a trap. Can you imagine the trouble we’d have been in if it had been some barouche full of her ladyship’s friends from London? What a trouncing we’d have taken! Mudgy me, it was bad enough as it was, what with her full of grippe and shivering fit to die.’

‘Aye, four oxen it took to pull the mannie out. It was lucky Tom Glossipp was riding past or the doctor’d have had a long walk of it.’

‘That horse of his, that nice little chestnut, was it ever right in itself afterwards?’

‘Can’t say, Mr Home. Never heard one way or t’other.’ They continued to Britannia and halted beside the ruins.

‘Y’know, Packy, one of these days we’ll have to do something about this road of ours. We can’t go on like this. A day or two of rain, that’s all it takes to turn it into porridge. Waters and tempers rise in tandem. The doctor can’t get in, her ladyship can’t get out – you’d think the Jacobites were banging on the door when she gets one of those moods on her. Dear me, it was lucky she wasn’t living here the day they did arrive. Do you remember that? Scared Cook witless they did, all those glinty little Scotch eyes suddenly staring at her through the window.’

Amos looked at him sideways and fiddled with his reins. ‘Us could put in a new road,’ he said tentatively.

‘Us could. Right enough, us could. But where the devil would we put it?’

‘Come along a bit higher up, p’raps?’

‘How now, Packy, take the book and score one lamb for Tom. Lying behind its mother under that boulder with the splash of yellow lichen. See where I mean?’

The day was well advanced by the time they had worked through the Out Ground and returned to the home pastures.

Nat felt hungry. And the work had kept him away from his private enquiries, which at that time were divided between the means of sustenance of an unnaturally large newt with a warty black spine and a yellow belly that he had discovered at the bottom of a well and the question as to whether buzzards always circled clockwise.

‘Parson’s coming in behind us,’ remarked Amos. ‘It’ll be another kind of lamb he’s thinking on, I reckon.’

Nat looked round. Sure enough, up the road from Britannia the Reverend Hughes was riding at a shambling trot, hunched over his saddle bow, his fat, black-gaitered legs dinging on his pony's ribs with every step it took. Nat splashed through the river to meet him.

'By Jove, Reverend, been at it again?' he said with a smile, indicating the laden saddlebags that hung on each side of the horse. 'We'll soon have to extend the parsonage if you continue to stock your library at this rate.'

'Only a few morsels that caught my eye in town,' replied the other in the thin tones of an older man. 'That chapman who comes up from Derby each month – whatsisname, you know who I mean – is as familiar with my weaknesses as you are yourself.' He bent forward and patted his bags. 'Still, the price was short and the type's dense. Elliott on the Pentateuch looks interesting – I've had one of his before. I like his style. He's not afraid to get to the pith of the matter. But as for the rest I hardly know what I've come away with. You know how it is for us disciples of Caxton. Something clicks, a cloud of madness comes over one, and before you know where you are, your purse is empty and Hood – that's the fellow's name, knew I had it somewhere – is grinning at you as if he'd saved your soul. Which I suppose he has in a manner of speaking. Now if you'll excuse me, Mr Home, I'd like to get my children unpacked and spend a little time coddling them before it gets too dark. Light like this is hard on an old man's eyes. Dear me, such a gloomy piece of weather we've had this month. Jonah himself could not have been more benighted than we have been.'

He tipped his hat to Home, made a regal, circular motion with his hand in the direction of Paxton and kicked on his pony. A breeze had arisen which caused the swallowtails of his clerical bands to flutter up round his throat.

'Our minister is a happy soul,' Nat said as he rejoined Amos. 'Do you remember the pother I was in over whether to appoint him or that other fellow who could reel off the

names of every pontiff and patriarch since the birth of Abraham?'

'Going back some you are now, sir. Aye, the Reverend's happy enough, though the missus did say he'd had a terrible go with the stone not long ago. Had no end of trouble passing it. As big as a bantam's egg, or so she heard. Did you know it was his sister who has the learning now of young Master Cuthbert . . .?'

They rode companiably along beside the Eve. A field away, Winterbourne House rose defiantly atop its eyrie as though on guard against invading forces. A coot scuttered noisily across the water into a clump of reeds. In a backwater under the opposite bank a couple of tiny bursting bubbles showed where a chub was feeding.

'Otter's back again,' Amos said. 'Expect she'll be rearing a litter somewhere hereabouts. Two, no three, years it's been since she was last here. Do you see her marks on the strip of mud by the flags?'

But Nat's eyes were elsewhere. For the clouds, which throughout the day had smothered Winterbourne in a blanket of grey, had suddenly thinned and broken over the hills before them. Like a window opening in a fortress wall, a round embrasure had appeared in the gloom and from it, buttressed on either side by towering fleecy mounds, streamed a funnel of daffodil-coloured sunlight. It descended at an angle across the mountain bowl, brushing the crowns of the beech trees with a palette of gold, green and all shades of black. From the very heavens it poured, catching, it seemed, in its long liquid gleam every mote and speck that could fly. And at its toe, trapped in the epicentre of its trumpet-shaped cone, lay Winterbourne House, shimmering like a jewel. Its windows flashed and blazed. Every detail of its huge carcass seemed magnified a hundredfold, from the finials on the gable ends and the gilded curlicues on the weathervane, down through the family escutcheons graven on the lead gutter heads to the

worn steel rims of the boot scrapers. Edward's toy sword, which he had thrust into a molehill on the lawn, shone with the intensity of Excalibur and cast behind it a shadow as slim as a pencil. In the space of a minute, the house had sloughed its skin of decrepitude. Refulgent, splendid and arrogant, it reared above them like a fiery-scaled dragon.

Nat sat on his horse transfixed. He put out a hand and gripped Amos's shoulder. 'Look at it, Packy. Just look at it will you, man? Did you ever see anything so glorious in your life? It's like a miracle. It reminds me of a picture I once saw showing Elijah being scooped up into heaven. Whoof, down came God's hand and up the ray he walked, his cloak flapping behind him. I tell you, it fairly gives my heart a wrench to see the old place so bright and young after all it's been through. Think of it, Packy, think of all the happiness and all the misery that have happened under its nose. Do you suppose it knows about them? Do you think it has a mind of its own, like you and me? Houses aren't just stones and mortar. They have spirits. You can feel them all around you the moment you open the front door. So why shouldn't they have minds as well? My God, it's, it's . . .'

His voice tailed off as he followed the shaft back to its molten eyeball hanging over the hills. Suddenly he started to squirm in his saddle, plucking at one ear lobe. 'That's what we'll do, we'll come through the hills with it, we'll put a road up through the wood, over the hill and down to the turnpike, a right spanker that her ladyship can be proud of till the day she dies. That's the answer! That's what we'll do! O fantastic mudgy – to hell with Britannia, damnation and the devil to its bogs and slithers. A pox on the lot of them, that's what I say!'

Every window in the mansion was now on fire, splintered by a thousand leaping pricks of flame. They saw Blanche come round the corner on to the terrace. She lifted her face to the sun and closed her eyes. Between her fingers was a single white rose. The buttons on her dress twinkled like

stars, the pendant at her throat glinted as she moved her head to sniff the bloom. She called down to them dreamily.

‘I must go to her –’. Nat threw Amos his reins, slipped his stirrups and ran clumsily across the field, waving his stubby arms above his head. Amos watched him climb the fence and scramble up to the terrace, where his wife stood waiting, her elbow cupped in the palm of one hand and her black eyes tipping the rose petals. Then he led Pilot away to the stables, feathering his hat round his skull and wondering how anyone could make such a fuss about a sunbeam.

That evening Nat did not read *Tristram Shandy.* He had Digworth light a fire in the library, open two of his best burgundy and fetch out the wax candles. He spoke encouragingly to Mrs Croft in the kitchen. He went upstairs and after a good deal of thought, selected his maroon coat and breeches. Edward’s door was open, so he entered and, because the image was still fresh in his mind, began to tell him a story about a pixie sliding down a moonbeam.

‘Do you know how old I am, father?’ asked the boy scornfully. Nat looked at him with amazement. It had never occurred to him that children could be other than three or four. That there could be an intervening stage between suckling at his mother’s breast and demanding a sub, a stage when a boy might wish to learn and a father could share some portion of his wisdom without impairing his dignity, struck him as wholly novel and delightful. It was yet another marvel in this blessed day of his. His face crinkled with pleasure as he pulled up a chair. ‘When can I come duck shooting with you?’ Edward asked. Man to man, they discussed the business thoroughly. They turned to other essential subjects.

Edward enquired about the newt, which he yearned to keep in his room. Of its own accord, the conversation shifted to how wells worked and where so much water came from.

‘Gallons and gallons of the stuff every day – imagine it, journeying from deep within the earth to this one point –’

‘How much is a gallon, father?’

Nat fetched out Edward’s pot. ‘About that much, I’d say.’ Their eyes met and laughed.

‘How many gallons a day does that make?’

‘By my calculations 13 gallons a minute, 780 gallons an hour and 18,720 gallons a day. Which is to say about 300 hogsheads. Of course it depends how wet the year has been.’

‘That bat you kept, do you think it would have eaten the newt or the other way round . . .?’

Nat kissed his son goodnight and ran down the stairs whistling, more completely happy in his heart than he had been for a long time. He even contemplated sliding down the banisters.

Blanche heard him from the drawing-room but for once she did not object. What he had said to her on the terrace and, more importantly, the manner in which he had said it, had brought back to her in a rush all her memories of the Nat she had once known and worshipped. Not the garrulous and inconsequent buffoon who was starting to go deaf, the middle-aged Shandy who preferred his steward’s company to her own, but the youth who had stolen up and captured her with a swarm of butterfly kisses as he offered her his heart for eternity. They had spoken to each other with their eyes also, caught echoes they’d both thought buried and, as that miraculous beam of light faded into the glim, entered arm in arm by the garden door.

The single rose stood in a vase between them as they ate and drank. Digworth was banished from the room. Afterwards they walked through to the library and unrolled the estate map on the table. Their heads touching, his arm twined through hers, they let their forefingers prowl side by side over the contours that the new road should follow. He called her his little treasure. She did not mind. He was again her man. It was, she realised, all she had ever cared about. ‘Do you remember . . .?’ she asked, leaning her head

against his shoulder. He put his arm softly round her waist and they went upstairs rather earlier than usual.

Three

FOR THREE YEARS the beech woods rang to the blows of the woodcutters' axes and the groans and oaths of the human debris that Nat, for no greater outlay than a few evenings' duck flighting and some pretty words in the magistrate's ear, had contrived to draft from the assizes.

Downwards trundled timber cradles laden with grey, shaven boles and upwards crawled a procession of carts charged to the brim with gravel and bottoming for the great enterprise. Trees crashed, picks rattled on stone, men laughed, swore, ached and sometimes vomited. Horses flirted in spring and neighed to each other through the autumn fogs. Arch stones were keyed into place with wooden fenders, and gabions swayed into their beds by a windlass of Paxton's engineering. Breechings snapped since this was the labour of humans, and one man, a red-haired giant convicted of vagrancy, broke his leg and screamed awfully. Overseen affably by Nat from Pilot's comfortable back, and sternly by Amos as with his plans and measuring rods under his arm he strode through the labourers and the draught horses, the dust, the mud and the noise, her ladyship's road inched upwards through the woods. Every Friday afternoon Blanche had Vinson, the coachman, drive her up in the dog cart to make an inspection of the works. When progress was less than she had hoped for, she frowned, and tapping Vinson on the shoulder, descended smartly to the fire waiting in her sitting-room. But usually she was delighted and, reclining at a safe distance from the sweaty gangs, took out her pencil to draw up lists of friends for house parties.

For Edward, of course, it was paradise. Mr Dryce, and with him rules of quantity, deponent verbs, the awkward aorist and the prophecies of Daniel were relegated to mornings only, leaving the rest of the day free for acts of blissful anarchy behind his father's back.

At the crest of the hill, the road paused to take in the view and then, with swoops and rushes, unwound itself like a serpent until, on one fine day in August 1774, it slid triumphantly into the turnpike directly opposite the convivial property of Arthur Smith, innkeeper at the Green Man. The last load of gravel was emptied, spread and raked. The stonemasons tapped home the last block of ashlar on the last parapet of the last bridge. Shovels were stacked. Brows were wiped. The deed was done.

Nat's pride knew no bounds. His face shone like a bonfire as he bustled round shaking hands and clapping backs. He leapt on to the parapet, wobbled, recovered, laughed at himself as loudly as anybody, and declared it 'the bonniest day in my life'. He called for three cheers for the men, three cheers for Edward for not having got himself killed by a lump of stone, a shovel or Mr Paxton, and three cheers for the finest wife in the kingdom. As the last Hip Hip Hoorah! faded into the air, he plucked from his head his father's bell-bottomed wig, which he had disinterred from the cupboard beneath the stairs expressly for the occasion, and tossed it aloft. It fell like a nest of wriggling spiders into the dust and was borne away between Trump's sturdy jaws to be buried in a rabbit hole pending later experimentation.

'Damned good dog,' he shouted, grinning from ear to ear, 'damned brave animal to touch a Winterbourne wig, what! Now come on lads, three cheers for the little lionheart, Hip, Hip . . .' Edward tugged at his sleeve and he hopped back on to the parapet.

'Blow me if I won't forget my own name next. I christian this road – here, come up beside me, my ruby, and we'll do it in style.' Blanche lifted her skirts and stepped primly on to