RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Porterhouse Blue

Tom Sharpe

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About the Author

Tom Sharpe was born in 1928 and educated at Lancing College and Pembroke College, Cambridge. He did his national service in the Marines before going to South Africa in 1951, where he did social work before teaching in Natal. He had a photographic studio in Pietermaritzburg from 1957 until 1961, and from 1963 to 1972 he was a lecturer in History at the Cambridge College of Arts and Technology.

He is the author of sixteen novels, including *Porterhouse Blue* and *Blott on the Landscape* which were serialised on television, and *Wilt* which was made into a film. In 1986 he was awarded the XXIIIème Grand Prix de l'Humour Noir Xavier Forneret and in 2010 he received the inaugural BBK La Risa de Bilbao Prize. Tom Sharpe died in 2013.

Also by Tom Sharpe

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Indecent Exposure
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The Great Pursuit
The Throwback
The Wilt Alternative
Ancestral Vices
Vintage Stuff
Wilt on High
Grantchester Grind
The Midden
Wilt in Nowhere
The Gropes
The Wilt Inheritance

Porterhouse Blue

A Porterhouse Chronicle

Tom Sharpe

arrow books

To Ivan and Pam Hattingh

1

It was a fine Feast. No one, not even the Praelector who was so old he could remember the Feast of ’09, could recall its equal – and Porterhouse is famous for its food. There was Caviar and Soupe à l’Oignon, Turbot au Champagne, Swan stuffed with Widgeon, and finally, in memory of the Founder, Beefsteak from an ox roasted whole in the great fireplace of the College Hall. Each course had a different wine and each place was laid with five glasses. There was Pouilly Fumé with the fish, champagne with the game and the finest burgundy from the College cellars with the beef. For two hours the silver dishes came, announced by the swish of the doors in the Screens as the waiters scurried to and fro, bowed down by the weight of the food and their sense of occasion. For two hours the members of Porterhouse were lost to the world, immersed in an ancient ritual that spanned the centuries. The clatter of knives and forks, the clink of glasses, the rustle of napkins and the shuffling feet of the College servants dimmed the present. Outside the Hall the winter wind swept through the streets of Cambridge. Inside all was warmth and conviviality. Along the tables a hundred candles ensconced in silver candelabra cast elongated shadows of the crouching waiters across the portraits of past Masters that lined the walls. Severe or genial, scholars or politicians, the portraits had one thing in common: they were all rubicund and plump. Porterhouse’s kitchen was long established. Only the new Master differed from his predecessors. Seated at

the High Table, Sir Godber Evans picked at his swan with a delicate hesitancy that was in marked contrast to the frank enjoyment of the Fellows. A fixed dyspeptic smile lent a grim animation to Sir Godber's pale features as if his mind found relief from the present discomforts of the flesh in some remote and wholly intellectual joke.

'An evening to remember, Master,' said the Senior Tutor sebaceously.

'Indeed, Senior Tutor, indeed,' murmured the Master, his private joke enhanced by this unsought prediction.

'This swan is excellent,' said the Dean. 'A fine bird and the widgeon gives it a certain *gamin* flavour.'

'So good of Her Majesty to give Her permission for us to have swan,' the Bursar said. 'It's a privilege very rarely granted, you know.'

'Very rare,' the Chaplin agreed.

'Indeed, Chaplain, indeed,' murmured the Master and crossed his knife and fork. 'I think I'll wait for the beefsteak.' He sat back and studied the faces of the Fellows with fresh distaste. They were, he thought once again, an atavistic lot, and never more so than now with their napkins tucked into their collars, an age-old tradition of the College, and their foreheads greasy with perspiration and their mouths interminably full. How little things had changed since his own days as an undergraduate in Porterhouse. Even the College servants were the same, or so it seemed. The same shuffling gait, the adenoidal open mouths and tremulous lower lips, the same servility that had so offended his sense of social justice as a young man. And still offended it. For forty years Sir Godber had marched beneath the banner of social justice, or at least paraded, and if he had achieved anything (some cynics doubted even that) it was due to the fine sensibility that had been developed by the social chasm that yawned between the College servants and the young gentlemen of Porterhouse. His subsequent career in politics had been

marked by the highest aspirations and the least effectuality, some said, since Asquith, and he had piloted through Parliament a series of bills whose aim, to assist the low-paid in one way or another, had resulted in that middle-class subsidy known as the development grant. His ‘Every Home a Bathroom’ campaign had led to the sobriquet Soapy and a knighthood, while his period as Minister of Technological Development had been rewarded by an early retirement and the Mastership of Porterhouse. It was one of the ironies of his appointment that he owed it to the very institution for which he professed most abhorrence, royal Patronage, and it was perhaps this knowledge that had led him to the decision to end his career as an initiator of social change by a real alteration in the social character and traditions of his old College. That and the awareness that his appointment had met with the adamant opposition of almost all the Fellows. Only the Chaplain had welcomed him, and that was in all likelihood due to his deafness and a mistaken apprehension of Sir Godber’s full name. No, he was Master by default even of his own convictions and by the failure of the Fellows to agree among themselves and choose a new Master by election. Nor had the late Master with his dying breath named his successor, thus exercising the prerogative Porterhouse tradition allows; failing these two expedients it had been left to the Prime Minister, himself in the death throes of an administration, to rid himself of a liability by appointing Sir Godber. In Parliamentary circles, if not in academic ones, the appointment had been greeted with relief. ‘Something to get your teeth into at last,’ one of his Cabinet colleagues had said to the new Master, a reference less to the excellence of the College cuisine than to the intractable conservatism of Porterhouse. In this respect the College is unique. No other Cambridge college can equal Porterhouse in its adherence to the old traditions and to this day Porterhouse men are distinguished [*sic*] by the cut of their

coats and hair and by their steadfast allegiance to gowns. ‘County come to Town,’ and ‘The Squire to School’, the other colleges used to sneer in the good old days, and the gibe has an element of truth about it still. A sturdy self-reliance except in scholarship is the mark of the Porterhouse man, and it is an exceptional year when Porterhouse is not Head of the River. And yet the College is not rich. Unlike nearly all the other colleges, Porterhouse has few assets to fall back on. A few terraces of dilapidated houses, some farms in Radnorshire, a modicum of shares in run-down industries, Porterhouse is poor. Its income amounts to less than £50,000 per annum and to this impecuniosity it owes its enduring reputation as the most socially exclusive college in Cambridge. If Porterhouse is poor, its undergraduates are rich. Where other colleges seek academic excellence in their freshmen, Porterhouse more democratically ignores the inequalities of intellect and concentrates upon the evidence of wealth. *Dives In Omnia*, reads the College motto, and the Fellows take it literally when examining the candidates. And in return the College offers social cachet and an enviable diet. True, a few scholarships and exhibitions exist which must be filled by men whose talents do not run to means, but those who last soon acquire the hallmarks of a Porterhouse man.

To the Master the memory of his own days as an undergraduate still had the power to send a shudder through him. A scholar in his day, Sir Godber, then plain G. Evans, had come to Porterhouse from a grammar school in Brierley. The experience had affected him profoundly. From his arrival had dated the sense of social inferiority which more than natural gifts had been the driving force of his ambition and which had spurred him on through failures that would have daunted a more talented man. After Porterhouse, he would remind himself on these occasions, a man has nothing left to fear. And certainly the College had left him socially resilient. To Porterhouse he owed his

nerve, the nerve a few years later, while still a Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of Transport, to propose to Mary Lacey, the only daughter of the Liberal Peer, the Earl of Sanderstead: the nerve to repeat the proposal yearly and to accept her annual refusal with a gracelessness that had gradually convinced her of the depth of his feelings. Yes, looking back over his long career Sir Godber could attribute much to Porterhouse and nothing more so than his determination to change once and for all the character of the college that had made him what he was. Looking down the hall at the faces florid in the candlelight and listening to the loud assertions that passed for conversation, he was strengthened in his resolve. The beefsteak and the burgundy came and went, the brandy trifle and the Stilton followed, and finally the port decanter made the rounds. Sir Godber observed and abstained. Only when the ritual of wiping one's forehead with a napkin dipped in a silver bowl had been performed did he make his move. Rapping his knife handle on the table for silence, the new Master of Porterhouse rose to his feet.

*

In the Musicians' Gallery Skullion watched the Feast. Behind him in the darkness the lesser College servants clustered backwardly and gaped at the brilliant scene below them, their pale faces gleaming dankly in the reflected glory of the occasion. As each new dish appeared a muted sigh went up. Their eyes glittered momentarily and glazed again. Only Skullion, the Head Porter, sat surveying the setting with an air of critical propriety. There was no envy in his eyes, only approval at the fitness of the arrangements and the occasional unexpressed rebuke when a waiter spilled the gravy or failed to notice an empty glass waiting to be refilled. It was all as it should be, as it had been since Skullion first came to the College as an

under-porter so many years ago. Forty-five Feasts there had been since then and at each Skullion had watched from the Musicians' Gallery just as his ancestors had watched since the College began. 'Skullion, eh? That's an interesting name, Skullion,' old Lord Wurford had said when he first stopped by the lodge in 1928 and saw the new porter there. 'A very interesting name. Skullion. A no nonsense damn-my-soul name. There've been skullions at Porterhouse since the Founder. You take that from me, there have. It's in the first accounts. A farthing to the skullion. You be proud of it.' And Skullion had been proud of it as though he had been newly christened by the old Master. Yes, those were the days and those were the men. Old Lord Wurford, a no nonsense damn-my-soul Master. He'd have enjoyed a feast like this. He wouldn't have sat up there fiddling with his fork and sipping his wine. He'd have spilt it down his front like he always used to and he'd have guzzled that swan like it was a chicken and thrown the bones over his shoulder. But he'd been a gentleman and a rowing man and he'd stuck to the old Boat Club traditions.

'A bone for the eight in front,' they used to shout.

'What eight? There ain't no eight in front.'

'A bone for the fish in front.' And over their shoulders the bones would go and if it was a good evening there was meat on them still and damned glad we was to get it. And it was true too. There was no eight in front in those days. Only the fish. In the darkness of the Musicians' Gallery Skullion smiled at his memories of his youth. All different now. The young gentlemen weren't the same. The spirit had gone out of them since the war. They got grants now. They worked. Who had ever heard of a Porterhouse man working in the old days? They were too busy drinking and racing. How many of this lot took a cab to Newmarket these days and came back five hundred to the bad and didn't turn a hair? The Honourable Mr Newland had in '33. Lived on Q staircase and got himself killed at Boulogne by the

Germans. Skullion could remember a score or more like him. Gentlemen they were. No nonsense damn-my-soul gentlemen.

Presently when the main courses were finished and the Stilton had made its appearance, the Chef climbed the stairs from the kitchen and took his seat next to Skullion.

'Ah, Chef, a fine Feast. As good as any I can remember,' Skullion told him.

'It's good of you to say so, Mr Skullion,' said the Chef.

'Better than they deserve,' said Skullion.

'Someone has to keep up the old traditions, Mr Skullion.'

'True, Chef, very true,' Skullion nodded. They sat in silence watching the waiters clearing the dishes and the port moving ritually round.

'And what is your opinion of the new Master, Mr Skullion?' the Chef asked.

Skullion raised his eyes to the painted timbers of the ceiling and shook his head sadly.

'A sad day for the College, Chef, a sad day,' he sighed.

'Not a very popular gentleman?' the Chef hazarded.

'Not a gentleman,' Skullion pronounced.

'Ah,' said the Chef. Sentence on the new Master had been passed. In the kitchen he would ever be the victim of social obloquy. 'Not a gentleman, eh? And him with his knighthood too.'

Skullion looked at him sternly. 'Gentlemen don't depend on knighthoods, Cheffy. Gentlemen is gentlemen,' Skullion told him, and the Chef, suitably rebuked, nodded. Mr Skullion wasn't somebody you argued with, not about matters of social etiquette, not in Porterhouse. Not if you knew what was good for you. Mr Skullion was a power in the College.

They sat silently mourning the passing of the old Master and the debasement of college life which the coming of a new Master, who was not a gentleman, brought with it.

‘Still,’ said Skullion finally, ‘it was a fine Feast. I can’t remember a better.’ He said it half-grudgingly, out of respect for the past, and was about to go downstairs when the Master rapped on the High Table for silence and stood up. In the Musicians’ Gallery Skullion and the Chef stared in horror at the spectacle. A speech at the Feast? No. Never. The precedence of five hundred and thirty-two Feasts forbade it.

*

Sir Godber stared down at the heads turned towards him so incredulously. He was satisfied. The stunned silence, the stares of disbelief, the tension were what he had wanted. And not a single snigger. Sir Godber smiled.

‘Fellows of Porterhouse, members of College,’ he began with the practised urbanity of a politician, ‘as your new Master I feel that this is a suitable occasion to put before you some new thoughts about the role of institutions such as this in the modern world.’ Calculated, every insult delicately calculated, Porterhouse an institution, new, modern, role. The words, the clichés defiled the atmosphere. Sir Godber smiled. His sense of grievance was striking home. ‘After such a meal’ (in the gallery the Chef shied), ‘it is surely not inappropriate to consider the future and the changes that must surely be made if we are to play our part in the contemporary world …’

The platitudes rolled out effortlessly, meaninglessly but with effect. Nobody in the hall listened to the words. Sir Godber could have announced the Second Coming without demur. It was enough that he was there, defying tradition and consciously defiling his trust. Porterhouse could remember nothing to equal this. Not even sacrilege but utter blasphemy. And awed by the spectacle, Porterhouse sat in silence.

‘And so let me end with this promise,’ Sir Godber wound up his appalling peroration, ‘Porterhouse will expand. Porterhouse will become what it once was – a house of learning. Porterhouse will change.’ He stopped and for the last time smiled and then, before the tension broke, turned on his heel and swept out into the Combination Room. Behind him with a sudden expiration of breath the Feast broke up. Someone laughed nervously, the short bark of the Porterhouse laugh, and then the benches were pushed back and they flooded out of the hall, their voices flowing out before them into the Court, into the cold night air. It had begun to snow. On the Fellows’ lawn Sir Godber Evans increased his pace. He had heard that bark and the sounds of the benches and the nervous energy he had expended had left him weak. He had challenged the College deliberately. He had said what he wanted to say. He had asserted himself. There was nothing they could do now. He had risked the stamping feet and the hisses and they had not come but now, with the snow falling round him on the Fellows’ lawn, he was suddenly afraid. He hurried on and closed the door of the Master’s Lodge with a sigh of relief.

As the hall emptied and as even the Fellows drifted through the door of the Combination Room, the Chaplain rose to say Grace. Deaf to the world and the blasphemies of Sir Godber, the Chaplain gave thanks. Only Skullion, standing alone in the Musicians’ Gallery, heard him and his face was dark with anger.

2

In the Combination Room the Fellows digested the Feast dyspeptically. Sitting in their high-backed chairs, each with an occasional table on which stood coffee cups and glasses of brandy, they stared belligerently into the fire. Gusts of wind in the chimney blew eddies of smoke into the room to mingle with the blue cirrus of their cigars. Above their heads grotesque animals pursued in plaster evidently plastered nymphs across a pastoral landscape strangely formal, in which flowers and the College crest, a Bull Rampant, alternated, while from the panelled walls glowered the gross portraits of Thomas Wilkins, Master 1618–39, and Dr Cox, 1702–40. Even the fireplace, itself surrounded by an arabesque of astonishing grapes and well-endowed bananas, suggested excess and added an extra touch of flatulence to the scene. But if the Fellows found difficulty in coming to terms with the contents of their stomachs, the contents of Sir Godber's speech were wholly indigestible.

'Outrageous,' said the Dean, discreetly combining protest with eructation. 'One might have imagined he was addressing an electoral meeting.'

'It was certainly a very inauspicious start,' said the Senior Tutor. 'One would have expected a greater regard for tradition. When all is said and done we are an old college.'

'All may have been said, though I doubt your optimism,' said the Dean, 'but it has certainly not been done. The

Master's infatuation with contemporary fashions of opinion may lead him to suppose that we are flattered by his presence. It is an illusion the scourings of party politics too naturally assume. I for one am unimpressed.'

'I must admit that I find his nomination most curious,' said the Praelector. 'One wonders what the Prime Minister had in mind.'

'The Government's majority is not a substantial one,' said the Senior Tutor. 'I should imagine he was ridding himself of a liability. If this evening's lamentable speech was anything to go by, Sir Godber's statements in the Commons must have raised a good many hackles on the back benches. Besides, his record of achievement is not an enviable one.'

'It still seems odd to me,' said the Praelector, 'that we should have been chosen for his retirement.'

'Perhaps his bark is worse than his bite,' said the Bursar hopefully.

'Bite?' shouted the Chaplain. 'But I've only just finished dinner. Not another morsel, thank you all the same.'

'One must assume that it was a case of any port in a storm,' said the Dean.

The Chaplain looked appalled.

'Port?' he screamed. 'After brandy? I can't think what this place is coming to.' He shuddered and promptly fell asleep again.

'I can't think what the Chaplain is coming to, come to that,' said the Praelector sadly. 'He gets worse by the day.'

'Anno domini,' said the Dean, 'anno domini, I'm afraid.'

'Not a particularly happy expression, Dean,' said the Senior Tutor, who still retained some vestiges of a classical education, 'in the circumstances.'

The Dean looked at him lividly. He disliked the Senior Tutor and found his allusions distinctly trying.

'The year of our Lord,' the Senior Tutor explained. 'I have the notion that our Master sees himself in the role of

the creator. We shall have our work cut out preventing him from overexerting himself. We have our faults I daresay but they are not ones I would wish to see Sir Godber Evans remedy.'

'I am sure the Master will allow himself to be guided by our advice,' said the Praelector. 'We have had some obdurate Masters in the past. Canon Bowel had some ill-advised notions about altering the Chapel services, I seem to recall.'

'He wanted compulsory Compline,' said the Dean.

'A fearful thought,' the Senior Tutor agreed. 'It would have interfered with the digestive process.'

'The point was made to him,' the Dean continued, 'after a particularly good dinner. We had had devilled crabs with jugged hare to follow. I think it was the cigars that did it. That and the zabaglione.'

'Zabaglione?' shouted the Chaplain. 'It's a little late but I daresay …'

'We were talking about Canon Bowel,' the Bursar explained to him.

The Chaplain shook his head. 'Couldn't abide the man,' he said. 'Used to live on poached cod.'

'He had a peptic ulcer.'

'I'm not surprised,' said the Chaplain. 'With a name like that he should have known better.'

'To return to the present Master,' the Senior Tutor said, 'I am not prepared to sit back and allow him to alter our present admissions policy.'

'I don't see how we can afford to,' the Bursar agreed. 'We are not a rich college.'

'The point will have to be made to him,' the Dean said. 'We look to you, Bursar, to see that he understands it.' The Bursar nodded dutifully. His was not a strong constitution and the Dean overawed him.

'I shall do my best,' he said.

‘And as far as the College Council is concerned I think the best policy will be one of … er … amiable inertia,’ the Praelector suggested. ‘That has always been one of our strong points.’

‘There’s nothing like prevarication,’ the Dean agreed, ‘I have yet to meet a liberal who can withstand the attrition of prolonged discussion of the inessentials.’

‘You don’t think the Bowel treatment, to coin a phrase?’ the Senior Tutor asked.

The Dean smiled and stubbed out his cigar.

‘There are more ways of killing a cat than stuffing it with …’

‘Hush,’ said the Praelector, but the Chaplain slept on. He was dreaming of the girls in Woolworths.

They left him sitting there and went out into the Court, their gowns wrapped round them against the cold. Like so many black puddings, they made their way to their rooms. Only the Bursar lived out with his wife. Porterhouse was still a very old-fashioned college.

*

In the Porter’s Lodge Skullion sat in front of the gas fire polishing his shoes. A tin of black polish stood on the table beside him and every few minutes he would dip the corner of his yellow duster into the tin and smear the polish on to the toe of his shoe with little circular movements. Round and round his finger would go inside the duster while the toecap dulled momentarily and grew to a new and deeper shine. Every now and then Skullion would spit on the cap and then rub it again with an even lighter touch before picking up a clean duster and polishing the cap until it shone like black japan. Finally he would hold the shoe away from him so that it caught the light and he could see deep in the brilliant polish a dark distorted reflection of himself.

Only then would he put the shoe to one side and start on the other.

It was something he had learnt to do in the Marines so many years ago and the ritual still had the satisfying effect it had had then. In some obscure way it seemed to ward off the thought of the future and all the threats implicit in that future, as if tomorrow was always a regimental sergeant-major and an inspection and change could be propitiated by a gleaming pair of boots. All the time his pipe smoked out of the corner of his mouth and the mantles of the gas fire darkened or glowed in the draught and the snow fell outside. And all the time Skullion's mind, protected by the ritual and the artefacts of habit, digested the import of the Master's speech. Change? There was always change and what good did it do? Skullion could think of nothing good in change. His memory ranged back over the decades in search of certainty and found it only in the assurance of men. Men no longer living or, if not dead, distant and forgotten, ignored by a world in search of effervescent novelty. But he had seen their assurance in his youth and had been infected by it so that now, even now, he could call it up like some familiar from the past to calm the seething uncertainties of the present. Quality, he had called it, this assurance that those old men had. Quality. He couldn't define it or fix it to particulars. They had had it, that was all, and some of them had been fools or blackguards come to that but when they'd spoken there'd been a harshness in their voices as if they didn't give a damn for anything. No doubts, that's what they'd had, or if they had them kept them to themselves instead of spreading their uncertainties about until you were left wondering who or where you were. Skullion spat on his shoe in memory of such men and their assurance and polished his reflection by the fire. Above him the tower clock whirred and rumbled before striking twelve. Skullion put on his shoes and went outside. The snow was falling still and the Court and all the College

roofs were white. He went to the postern gate and looked outside. A car slushed by and all the way up King's Parade the lamps shone orange through the falling snow. Skullion went in and shut the door. The outside world was none of his affair. It had a bleakness that he didn't want to know.

He went back into the Porter's Lodge and sat down again with his pipe. Around him the paraphernalia of his office, the old wooden clock, the counter, the rows of pigeonholes, the keyboard and the blackboard with 'Message for Dr Messmer' scrawled on it, were reassuring relics of his tenure and reminders that he was still needed. For forty-five years Skullion had sat in the Lodge watching over the comings and goings of Porterhouse until it seemed he was as much a part of the College as the carved heraldic beasts on the tower above. A lifetime of little duties easily attended to while the world outside stormed by in a maelstrom of change had bred in Skullion a devotion to the changelessness of Porterhouse traditions. When he'd first come there'd been an Empire, the greatest Empire that the world had known, a Navy, the greatest Navy in the world, fifteen battleships, seventy cruisers, two hundred destroyers, and Skullion had been a keyboard sentry on the *Nelson* with her three for'ard turrets and her arse cut off to meet the terms of some damned treaty. And now there was nothing left of that. Only Porterhouse was still the same. Porterhouse and Skullion, relics of an old tradition. As for the intellectual life of the College, Skullion neither knew nor cared about it. It was as incomprehensible to him as the rigmarole of a Latin mass to some illiterate peasant. They could say or think what they liked. It was the men he worshipped, some at least and fewer these days, their habits and the trappings he associated with that old assurance. The Dean's, 'Good morning, Skullion,' Dr Huntley's silk shirts, the Chaplain's evening stroll around the Fellows' Garden, Mr Lyons' music evening every Friday, the weekly parcel from the Institute for Dr Baxter. Chapel,

Hall, the Feast, the meeting of the College Council, all these occasions like internal seasons marked the calendar of Skullion's life and all the time he looked for that assurance that had once been the hallmark of a gentleman.

Now sitting there with the gas fire hissing before him he searched his mind for what it was those old men signified. It wasn't that they were clever. Some were, but half were stupid, more stupid than the young men coming up these days. Money? Some had a lot and others hadn't. That wasn't what had made the difference. To him at least. Perhaps it had to them. A race apart they were. Helpless half of them. Couldn't make their beds, or wouldn't. And arrogant. 'Skullion this and Skullion that.' Oh, he'd resented it at the time and done it all the same and hadn't minded afterwards because … because they'd been gentlemen. He spat into the fire affectionately and remembered an argument he'd had once with a young pup in a pub who'd heard him going on about the good old days.

'What gentlemen?' the lad had said. 'A lot of rich bastards with nothing between their ears who just exploited you.'

And Skullion had put down his pint and said, 'A gentleman stood for something. It wasn't what he was. It was what he knew he ought to be. And that's something you will never know.' Not what they were but what they ought to be, like some old battle standard that you followed because it was a symbol of the best. A ragged tattered piece of cloth that stood for something and gave you confidence and something to fight for.

He got up and walked across the Court and through the Screens and down the Fellows' Garden to the back gate. Everywhere the snow had submerged the details of the garden. Skullion's feet on the gravel path were soundless. In a few rooms lights still burned. The Dean's windows were still alight.

‘Brooding on the speech,’ Skullion thought and glanced reproachfully at the Master’s Lodge where all was dark. At the back gate he stood looking up at the rows of iron spikes that topped the wall and the gate. How often in the old days he had stood there in the shadow of the beech-trees watching young gentlemen negotiate those spikes only to step out and take their names. He could remember a good many of those names still and see the startled faces turned towards his as he stepped out into the light.

‘Good morning, Mr Hornby. Dean’s report in the morning, sir.’

‘Oh damn you, Skullion. Why can’t you go to bed sometimes?’

‘College regulations, sir.’

And they had gone off to their rooms cursing cheerfully. Now no one climbed in. Instead they knocked you up at all hours. Skullion didn’t know why he bothered to come and look at the back wall any more. Out of habit. Old habit. He was just about to turn and trudge back to his bed in the Lodge when a scuffling noise stopped him in his tracks. Someone in the street was trying to climb in.

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Zipser walked down Free School Lane past the black clunch walls of Corpus. The talk on ‘Population Control in the Indian Subcontinent’ had gone on longer than he had expected, partly due to the enthusiasm of the speaker and partly to the intractable nature of the problem itself. Zipser had not been sure which had been worse, the delivery, if that was an appropriate word to use about a speech that concerned itself with abortion, or the enthusiastic advocacy of vasectomy which had prolonged the talk beyond its expected limits. The speaker, a woman doctor with the United Nations Infant Prevention Unit in Madras, who seemed to regard infant mortality as a positive blessing,

had disparaged the coil as useless, the pill as expensive, female sterilization as complicated, had described vasectomy so seductively that Zipser had found himself crossing and recrossing his legs and wishing to hell that he hadn't come. Even now as he walked back to Porterhouse through the snow-covered streets he was filled with foreboding and a tendency to waddle. Still, even if the world seemed doomed to starvation, he had had to get out of Porterhouse for the evening. As the only research graduate in the College he found himself isolated. Below him the undergraduates pursued a wild promiscuity which he envied but dared not emulate, and above him the Fellows found compensation for their impotence in gluttony. Besides he was not a Porterhouse man, as the Dean had pointed out when he had been accepted. 'You'll have to live in College to get the spirit of the place,' he had said, and while in other colleges research graduates lived in cheap and comfortable digs, Zipser found himself occupying an exceedingly expensive suite of rooms in Bull Tower and forced to follow the regime of an undergraduate. For one thing he had to be in by twelve or face the wrath of Skullion and the indelicate inquiries next morning of the Dean. The whole system was anachronistic and Zipser wished he had been accepted by one of the other colleges. Skullion's attitude he found particularly unpleasant. The Porter seemed to regard him as an interloper, and lavished a wealth of invective on him normally reserved for tradesmen. Zipser's attempts to mollify him by explaining that Durham was a university and that there had been a Durham College in Oxford in 1380 had failed hopelessly. If anything, the mention of Oxford had increased Skullion's antipathy.

'This is a gentleman's college,' he had said, and Zipser, who didn't claim to be even a putative gentleman, had been a marked man ever since. Skullion had it in for him.

As he crossed Market Hill he glanced at the Guildhall clock. It was twelve thirty-five. The main gate would be shut and Skullion in bed. Zipser slackened his pace. There was no point in hurrying now. He might just as well stay out all night now. He certainly wasn't going to knock Skullion up and get cursed for his pains. It wouldn't have been the first time he had wandered about Cambridge all night. Of course there was Mrs Biggs the bedder to be taken care of. She came to wake him every morning and was supposed to report him if his bed hadn't been slept in but Mrs Biggs was accommodating. 'A pound in the purse is worth a flea in the ear,' she had explained after his first stint of night wandering, and Zipser had paid up cheerfully. Mrs Biggs was all right. He was fond of her. There was something almost human about her in spite of her size.

Zipser shivered. It was partly the cold and partly the thought of Mrs Biggs. The snow was falling heavily now and it was obvious he couldn't stay out all night in this weather. It was equally clear that he wasn't going to wake Skullion. He would have to climb in. It was an undignified thing for a graduate to do but there was no alternative. He crossed Trinity Street and went past Caius. At the bottom he turned right and came to the back gate in the lane. Above him the iron spikes on top of the wall looked more threatening than ever. Still, he couldn't stay out. He would probably freeze to death if he did. He found a bicycle in front of Trinity Hall and dragged it up the lane and put it against the wall. Then he climbed up until he could grasp the spikes with his hands. He paused for a moment and then with a final kick he was up with one knee on the wall and his foot under the spikes. He eased himself up and swung the other leg over, found a foothold and jumped. He landed softly in the flowerbed and scrambled to his feet. He was just moving off down the path under the beech-tree when something moved in the shadow and a hand fell on his shoulder. Zipser reacted instinctively. With a wild flurry