

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



How I Met My Wife & Other Stories

Nicholas Coleridge

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Also by Nicholas Coleridge

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How I Met My Wife & Other Stories

Nicholas Coleridge



To Georgia

Introduction

It took me six years to write these fourteen short stories. Because I have always had a job working in the urgent world of magazines, they were mostly written on holiday, which partly explains why nine of them are set abroad. But looking back at my longhand manuscripts, I now notice a peculiar thing. Few of the stories were actually written in the foreign countries in which they are set. I see that I was writing 'The Man Who Loved Driving', a story set in Turkey, from the improbable vantage point of Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh. 'The Big Game Hunters of Detroit', which mostly takes place near Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh, was written in Tuscany. 'The Swaffham Madonna', set in Tuscany, was written while driving across Turkey.

'Lucky Beggars', which is a story about an English couple with small children on holiday in Sri Lanka, I wrote in Sri Lanka's maximum security jail in Colombo, where I had been hilariously imprisoned on suspicion of being an international Tamil terrorist spy. I am still grateful to the Governor of Colombo prison who ensured that I was undisturbed for hours at a time so that I could concentrate.

None of the stories in this collection is wholly true. Most are inventions; the two or three stories with their genesis in real events have been so elaborately distorted that any resemblance, as they say, between a character in the book and any living person is almost entirely coincidental. This is especially true of the story called 'How I Met My Wife', which happily had an altogether different ending in real life.

Various people gave me technical advice about this and that, which I sometimes ignored when it compromised the

story. Anthony and Ewa Lewis tried to put me right on legal procedure. John Hatt and Melissa Colston were helpful on the subject of Indian tigers. Jake Brunner provided me with information about satellites. Napier Miles contributed a further twist to the story called 'Legal Tender'. Anthony Gardner and Ysenda Maxtone Graham read some early drafts. Linda Kelsey and Maggie Goodman published stories by me in their magazines which was wildly encouraging.

I am as ever enormously grateful to Leslie Gardner, my literary agent, and Helen Fraser and everybody else at William Heinemann. I would particularly like to thank Julia Elliott, who typed and retyped these stories so brilliantly until she virtually knew them by heart, and Georgia Coleridge for her unfailing enthusiasm and good ideas.

HOW I MET MY WIFE

ONE SUMMER'S AFTERNOON in 1984 I strolled into my old office in Carnaby Street. I had had lunch at an oyster bar, avoided poisoning and was feeling unusually reckless. Crouching behind my desk, where she was tidying a filing cabinet, was a most beautiful girl in a matelot T-shirt. She had perfect smooth white skin, enormous green eyes, and a wonderfully enthusiastic smile that made my heart leap. She explained that she was temping in the office for one day only, before flying to Turkey to go backpacking for six months. It was her year out before university. We talked about Turkey, a country I know well, and how she might head further east to India. I wrote out a list of books that she should take with her, and novelists she must read – Naipaul, Kipling, Rose Tremain – if she was to understand the countries at all. It took me a couple of days – by which time she was already in Istanbul – to realise that I badly wanted to see Anna again.

I thought about her constantly and experienced all the classic symptoms of being in love: stumbling across her Christian name in newspapers, imagining I saw her across restaurants, looking up when something happening in Turkey was mentioned on the evening news. To be surrounded by old friends became oppressive, to be alone morbid. I found it impossible to get a picture of her out of my mind, alone and adrift in Asia.

There followed a fortnight of detective work. From the personnel department at my office I discovered Anna's secretarial agency. From the agency I obtained her home address. She lived with her parents in Fulham – not far from my own house, I discovered when I drove past. When I rang

them they were in, and helpful, and told me what they knew of Anna's itinerary in Turkey. There was a poste restante address in Erzurum in eastern Turkey where they were writing to her, to await collection, but they didn't expect her to reach Erzurum for a couple of weeks. In an atlas I plotted her likely route. She had told me she was going to visit first the classical sites down the west coast – Troy, Ephesus, Pergamum, Priene – then the early Christian cave churches in Cappadocia. If she intended to reach Erzurum by the end of the month she must keep moving fast. She had told me she'd be taking the *Lonely Planet* guidebook to Turkey for its list of cheap, clean hotels – students and overlanders call it the Bible – and I bought a copy, and sat it next to the atlas and her mother's rough itinerary, and made a guess at where she was. If she'd arrived in Izmir on the 17th she would have visited Ephesus the next morning, the 18th, caught an evening bus to Denizli, stayed till the 20th . . . and so on and so on. There were many variables. But eventually I settled on four possible towns, each with a choice of hotels, nine places in all. The next morning I discovered their telex numbers – those that had telex numbers, two didn't – from the Turkish tourist office in Hanover Street, and fired seven identical messages from my office into Cappadocia. The wording was nonchalant: 'Am likely to be in the area next week to research travel article. Any chance of a drink?'

As soon as I had sent them, I saw how slim – how preposterous – was the likelihood of Anna ever receiving one. But three days later a reply came back: 'Have just arrived and found your message. What a surprise. How on earth do you know where I'm staying? Will probably be here for four more days. Hope to see you if your work brings you here. Turkey is wonderful.'

I bought an air ticket and flew to Istanbul. A good thing about being a journalist is having a watertight excuse to go anywhere on a whim, without arousing suspicion, and

offsetting the cost by writing a couple of articles. Istanbul is less than halfway to Cappadocia, so I took the overnight train to Ankara and then a bus south-east past the lakes to Kayseri and then a rambunctious taxi to the hotel at Urgup. The journey from Ankara took twenty hours, but in a curious way it made little impression on me. I was incredibly calm. By now I could barely remember what Anna looked like, only that being with her was in some way vastly important, and so I sat in the taxi with my luggage at my feet and played clock patience on the back seat.

Anna's hotel was on the outskirts of the town, and consisted of two floors of rooms leading off open corridors above a pudding shop. There was a small reception area, none too clean, with a beige vinyl sofa on which were sitting three Dutch or German backpackers counting their money. The whole place smelt slightly of drains and cologne. Through a door behind the reception I could see an enormous grey telex machine – it was as big as a fridge – and it seemed nothing less than a miracle that my message could ever have got here. Sitting behind the desk was a misshapen Turk with a rheumy eye, who was intent on altering the plastic numbers on a special black plastic pinboard showing the exchange rate for traveller's cheques in various currencies.

'I am looking for an English girl called Anna who is staying here,' I said. 'Do you know which is her room number?' I longed for her to be in – the keys for half the rooms were dangling behind him from a wall of hooks.

The misshapen Turk raised his eyes to heaven and muttered '*Yok*' – no – and returned to his pinboard.

'Look,' I said, 'I know there's a girl called Anna staying here. English girl. I received a telex.' I rummaged for the precious message in my luggage. The Turk shrugged.

And then, protruding from a cubbyhole beneath his desk, I saw my name. Elation, my own name written in a girl's handwriting, a message for me here. I took it, unfolded it. It

said: 'Dear Nicholas. I doubt you'll read this because you'll never find this hole of a hotel, but just in case, I'm afraid I've already left for India because I suddenly got the chance of a cheap bus ticket to Delhi (hooray!). I've always wanted to see Rajasthan etc. - forts, Taj Mahal, Lake Palace etc. Hope your article goes well. Love, Anna.'

Cappadocia to India takes five days by bus, and I could see from the date on Anna's letter that she'd left three days earlier. The nearest airport was Ankara, and if I took a taxi all the way I might make it in fourteen hours, and try to get a flight to India the following afternoon. It did not occur to me to abandon the chase, or even that my pursuit might irritate her. I had a fortnight to spare and enough money, and seeing Anna again had become a fixation. So long as there was a further clue, I would follow it up.

At the same time I was conscious that my prospects of finding her were slim; the combined population of the five countries which divided us was 886 million, and it might be difficult to spot a matelot T-shirt in the throng. Nor did her message give more than the barest indication of her plans in India. She had told me that she intended whenever possible to avoid large cities, so I guessed that as soon as her bus reached Delhi she'd set off again south for Rajasthan. I spent the entire taxi journey back to Ankara, and the four-hour flight to Delhi the next day, second-guessing her route. Whenever I looked down at the ground from the aeroplane I became discouraged. Iran and then Pakistan spread out beneath us in massive folds of yellow and grey, and if you looked carefully you could just see the reflection of the sun glinting on the roofs of tiny cars and buses driving along interminable empty roads. Why would Anna not leave the bus at any one of the hundreds of hamlets I could see below me - or at a fort, she said she'd always wanted to see forts. And yet if she reached Delhi I felt it was possible, just possible, to predict her course. On her first trip to India she'd surely head first for somewhere

she'd heard of: Agra and the Taj Mahal seemed the likeliest, or Jaipur and the Amber Palace. Agra was the most probable, but I wouldn't go there for a simple reason. By the time I arrived in Delhi Anna would still have a day's start on me. Assuming she headed for Agra, she wouldn't spend more than two days there seeing the Taj and Fatehpur Sikri. Then she'd be sure to move west to Jaipur. If on the other hand she chose to go straight to Jaipur, she'd spend more time there, I reckoned, so I'd be able to catch her up. Catch her up or head her off. I became convinced Jaipur was Anna's destination.

My taxi from Delhi took four hours. I arrived hot and exasperated. I had not eaten or slept properly since leaving my flat in London sixty-two hours before. I took a room in the budget hotel most glowingly recommended by the *Lonely Planet* guide, and crashed out. By the time I awoke, according to the reception boy, Anna had checked in on another floor.

My presence, I saw at once, was going to be difficult to explain. The travel article excuse could not be used twice. Nobody, however little they knew about journalism, could swallow a double coincidence of such proportions. I realised I was in danger of looking uncool.

I crept downstairs for breakfast on the verandah and adopted a strategic position behind the *Hindustan Times*. The air was heavy with cinnamon and garam masala. I picked at toast spread with cherry jam and waited for Anna: not eagerly but with dread. My meeting with her at the office had been so short and inconsequential, it seemed nothing short of insane that I should be sitting on a bamboo chair in an hotel in Jaipur, seven thousand miles away, cowering behind a newspaper.

The Imperial is a bustling hotel. There are more than a hundred rooms and few people stay for longer than two nights. The other guests were for the most part Europeans: backpackers passing through. They had the pinched look of

overlanders who had eaten poorly for a long time, and I hoped that Anna's expression had lost none of its freshness in the three weeks she'd been away.

My concern was unnecessary: I recognised her at once. Her smile was as open and warm as before. She sat down at the table next to mine, so that we were separated only by the width of a sheet of newsprint. I heard her order breakfast. 'Tea, mango juice, porridge and scrambled eggs for two.'

For two!

A gangling youth loped on to the verandah. 'Christ, Anna,' he said, 'what a hassle. I'd lost one of my socks at the bottom of our bed.'

'Well, at least we've arrived,' said Anna, 'and on our own at last. It really freaked me when that man almost turned up in Turkey. He pretended to be a real expert on travelling, but I bet he was secretly trying to pick me up.'

THE MANCHU HORSE

i

WHEN KEN WITTS sold his contract office cleaning business and made a packet, he didn't see why he shouldn't experience some of life's little luxuries. But since he had spent his first fifty-six years becoming a rich man, and knew that the rich are habitually taken for a ride, he was determined to experience luxury on his own terms.

'There are two prices for everything in this world, my friend,' he enjoyed saying. 'There's the price you're asked, and the price you're prepared to pay. All I ask for is the second price.'

Nineteen times out of twenty he got it, too. He was a relentless bargainer, and seldom went anywhere without putting up a special proposition. He insisted on discounts in places where it never occurred to others to ask for one. Most people are too squeamish or too proud to negotiate the price of a suite in an hotel. Ken Witts wasn't. As soon as he'd seen a suite he liked (and he was diligent about viewing every available one) he sought out the general manager.

'Now listen here, my friend,' he would say, 'I think we can do business together, you and I. You have a suite on the sixth floor of your hotel that's unoccupied, and I have a good mind to take it for a week. The only problem is the price. Your helpful little lady at reception tells me the room is £210 a night not including breakfast, which sounds steep to me. Now I'm prepared to give you £140 a night, cash. Do we have a deal?'

Sometimes the general manager would reply sarcastically, 'I regret we don't barter at the Palace, sir. The price of our suites is exactly as you were advised.'

Then Witts would become angry. 'Don't get starchy with me, sonny,' he'd say. 'Everything's negotiable in this world. They told me at the front desk you've got eight vacant suites. What are you telling me? That you're turning down nine hundred quid for nothing? That you want me to stay at the Regal up the road? Is that what you're saying?'

It was remarkable how compelling this logic seemed to be, and how often Ken Witts got his way.

'Providing you don't mention it to any of our other guests, sir, I think we might be able to accommodate you at the rate you propose.'

'That's fine by me, friend,' replied Ken Witts, 'providing you throw in the breakfast.'

The funny thing was, that when he finally got the suite he wanted, he didn't really enjoy it much. He had little taste, and no feeling for creature comforts. Huge marble bathrooms gave him no pleasure, and if you asked him to describe his bedroom he wouldn't have a clue what colour his bedcover or the curtains were, or whether there was an elegant piece of furniture. Once the bellboy had shown him how to work the bath taps, and where the mini-bar fridge was hidden, Witts sprawled on his bed and watched television. He had never married, and had no girlfriend to accompany him on these hotel visits. Indeed, one of his favourite arguments for a discount was that, as a single man in a suite, he deserved a substantial kickback, since he used only one bath towel, half the coathangers and only one side of the bed.

Ken Witts was a big man, with a stomach grown fat from years of delegation in office cleaning. His complexion was florid, he had a full head of wavy grey hair and unexpectedly elegant hands. His posture was good, and in a suit (the price for which he haggled over shamelessly with

his tailor) he could look distinguished. If you asked him what attracted him to stay in grand hotels, he replied, 'Well, I owe it to myself, I've worked hard to make my money.' But what really thrilled him were the huge sums he was able to chisel off. Although the cost of suites at five-star hotels started very high, his discount often exceeded the entire cost of staying at a smaller place. It tickled him that the people who ran these exclusive places were every bit as susceptible to a fair bargain as anyone else.

For three years he bartered his way around Britain. There was hardly an hotel in Piccadilly or Park Lane that didn't succumb to his cheapskate propositions, and the country hotels were, if anything, even less reluctant. Witts lost count of the weekends he spent in Georgian manor houses outside Bath and mock-Tudor ones in Berkshire without ever paying more than two-thirds of the official tariff. He bargained his way around the Highlands of Scotland (now there was a challenge; some of those castle owners really earned his respect) and then the health clubs and spas.

Restaurants presented a different challenge. The mark-up on wine is invariably high, and it was a simple matter to choose a good bottle of burgundy from the wine list at eighty pounds and offer fifty for it, providing the negotiation took place well in advance of dinner. With food, Witts would take the restaurant manager to one side and say, 'I see you have monkfish on the menu tonight, friend . . .' and it was a rare night that a couple of pounds couldn't somehow be filleted from the price.

You might reasonably wonder why these smart establishments were so accommodating. By the time Ken Witts had completed the bargaining, there was little or no profit left for them in his patronage. Largely, I suspect, it was the novelty of the situation that made them succumb. Managers of such places have many qualities, but few are trained to cope with someone like Ken Witts. If they tried to resist him, his arguments became more and more detailed

and specious. He quoted the cost of the raw materials, and in this he knew what he was talking about. If he chose a *langoustine* salad, restaurant managers were reminded of the wholesale price of shellfish, lettuce, brown bread and lemons, as a means of demonstrating how little it was really costing them. Witts never made much allowance for the reputation and overheads of a place. In his opinion a *langoustine* salad was a *langoustine* salad, whether you ate it at the Ritz or at a seaside café.

‘It’s exactly the same principle as contract cleaning,’ he said. ‘Keep your labour costs low, buy your materials below wholesale, and pass on part of the saving to the customer to undercut the competition. Basic business practice. It’s no different just because you’re in the luxury hotel biz.’ It was sharp cost consciousness that had made Ken Witts’s fortune. In the thirty years he was building his company, it was his boast that nowhere were cleaners more badly paid. He had a fleet of old buses that collected his workers at five in the morning from pick-up points all over London – Caribbean women from Lambeth, Poles from Ealing, Tamils from Southall – and dropped them at the merchant bank and insurance companies he had contracts to clean. His turnover of staff was exceptionally high, but this was no disadvantage. There were always new immigrants prepared to put up with his paltry wages, until they found something better.

It so happened that, one bank holiday weekend, Ken Witts was staying at an expensive Elizabethan hotel just outside Pershore in Worcestershire. He was well pleased with himself, having achieved a big discount on a big bedroom overlooking the lawn, never an easy thing over a bank holiday in high season. So generally benign did he feel that when he was approached by a fellow guest in the morning room he smiled encouragingly at him.

After a few uninteresting pleasantries, the fellow guest said, ‘Mind if I ask you something? What’s your bedroom

like?’

‘Large,’ replied Ken Witts rather smugly.

‘Ours is a rabbit hutch. My wife went mad when she saw it. It’s nothing like the one they put in their brochure.’

‘So what are you doing about it?’ asked Witts. Situations like this were always a trial for him. His instinctive reaction was to take up cudgels on the stranger’s behalf, escort him to the manager’s office and secure a whopping compensation with misery money on top. But his better judgement said, ‘No, there’s nothing in this for you, Kenneth Witts.’ He knew that if everybody went round bagging discounts, niggling away at the proper price, then his own special negotiations could only become tougher.

‘What did I do?’ said the fellow guest, whose name was Martin Pendle. ‘I went straight to the manager, that’s what I did, and I told him to shift us to another room. Don’t worry, I took the brochure along with me, and I said, “Give us this room, please, the one you photographed, with the window seat and the garden view and the tapestry settee.”’

‘And what did he say?’ asked Ken Witts, perturbed.

‘He said no,’ said Martin Pendle. ‘He said that room was already taken.’

Ken Witts relaxed. The room in the brochure was his; he had expressly requested it.

‘So I said to the manager, “Where are you going to put us, then? Barbara’s refusing to unpack in our present room and is asking to go home.” Well, he looked thoroughly uncomfortable at this, and kept saying how unfortunate it all was, and that being a bank holiday weekend the hotel is full, and there are no other bedrooms in the whole place. Well, that was not good enough, and I told him so. “What do you wish us to do then, sir?” asks the manager. “Would you like me to refund your deposit and you can stay somewhere else?” I said, “What, on a bank holiday when everywhere else is full up too, and we can’t go home because we’ve nothing to eat and the shops are shut for the holiday? I’m

not accepting that," I said. "What I want's a discount, and a large one too."

Ken Witts did not like the sound of this. He didn't like it one bit. He clenched and unclenched his fingers inside his pockets. If there were any further discounts to be had at the Pershore Park Hotel, they should properly be coming his way. Witts was as taut as a Bengal tiger that has just caught wind of a rival sloping on to his territory.

'And did you get your large discount?' he asked as nonchalantly as he could manage.

'Not easily,' replied Pendle. 'The manager kept going back to his first offer, that if we didn't like the room we should go home with our deposit refunded. I'm telling you, that really made me hit the roof. I threatened to take him to court for misrepresentation in his brochure, and reminded him what a field day the local newspaper would have over that. Eventually he proposed a twenty-five per cent rebate on the room.'

'And you took it, my friend?'

'No way,' said Pendle. 'I told him exactly what he could do with his twenty-five per cent. It was bloody derisory. I told him I'd spent more than that just getting here, what with a full tank of petrol and wear and tear on the car.'

Ken Witts looked at Pendle with a new respect. Depreciation on your car, indeed. That was a line he'd never even thought of. He'd have to watch Pendle.

'By now,' said Martin Pendle, 'we'd been arguing for an hour and a half and the dinner gong was sounding. So I says to the manager, "You're never going to get anyone else for that room now," and I demanded a straight fifty per cent.'

'And what happened?'

'I got it. And fifty per cent off the food too. Just as I meant to when I went in there.'

Ken Witts felt queasy, and steadied himself against the arm of a sofa. Fifty per cent on a bank holiday weekend. It was a remarkable achievement, for which he felt an insane

jealousy. *Fifty per cent*. He himself had only achieved forty. The extra ten per cent was a slur on his professionalism. Unable to make even a pretence at further civility, he went up to his room. The lunch gong sounded but he could not bring himself to eat. The idea of sitting in the same dining room as Martin and Barbara Pendle, and knowing that every mouthful of camembert soufflé and quail stuffed with apricots was costing them ten per cent less than it was costing him, put Ken Witts into a black mood. All afternoon he sulked in his bedroom. He dared not look out of the window, in case Martin and Barbara were playing discounted croquet on the lawn or eating a discounted cream tea. He could take no further pleasure in the Pershore Park Hotel. In the evening he asked for his dinner to be brought upstairs to him on a tray, and he watched television.

By the next morning, Ken Witts's peevishness had subsided into grudging admiration, and he resolved to do some industrial espionage. There was something cunning about Pendle, and Witts suspected that the idea of a discount had occurred to him long before he and Barbara were shown their small room. 'Pendle's done this before,' he said to himself. 'There's real technique there.'

Ken Witts found Pendle alone at a table overlooking the clock golf course, where he was enjoying the sort of hearty full English breakfast that is only cheap at half the price.

'I've been thinking about that refund you got on your room,' said Witts in his most avuncular manner, 'and I've got to say I hand it to you. I'd never have the bottle to bargain like that.'

'That's because you haven't lived out East,' said Martin Pendle. 'You learn to haggle for everything out there, it's expected of you. In fact the Chinese in the shops are quite disappointed if you don't. You ought to see the Hong Kong shopkeepers when they get the bit between their teeth. You can spend days agreeing a price.'

Ken Witts had never been to Hong Kong, and he felt a warm surge of greed inside him, which started in his stomach and quickly moved to the tips of his fingers and toes. He had a strong premonition that Pendle was going to tell him something that would profoundly change his life in some way. He felt like the early explorers must have done, on first being told about the New World of America, and all the fresh challenges it presented.

‘It’s in the art galleries you really have to haggle,’ went on Pendle. ‘They call them art emporiums out there – enormous places some of them, behind Connaught Road in Central. You’ve never seen so much stuff: paintings on silk, blue china, some of it valuable, some not; glazed rice bowls, ivory carvings, enamel trays. As soon as a tourist steps through the door it’s a hundred per cent on everything. You’d be mad to pay more than half the asking price, but people do, you know, you’d be amazed. Barbara and I were out there for six years with Cabot’s, the rubber firm, and we spent days in some of those places, striking a deal on this or that.’

‘And you always beat them down to half eventually?’

‘As often as not. Fifty per cent off. Fifty-five per cent. Fifty-five’s what we aimed for.’

Martin Pendle meticulously spread a fourth slice of toast with lime marmalade. It was easy to imagine him in Hong Kong, pummelling away at the price day after day, refusing to close the deal until every last Hong Kong dollar, every last scrap of fat on the meat, had been worn away.

‘Not that the young Chinese salesmen are a patch on their grandfathers,’ said Martin Pendle. ‘Now those old boys really did know how to haggle. Crafty as sin, and prepared to invest real time in a sale. The young ones are all for turnover, but the old guys would spend weeks negotiating on a single piece. They didn’t care whether they sold it or not, you see, or anyway pretended they didn’t. So they’d fight you over every dollar. I’ve heard of guys who went

back to the same shop every afternoon for a month, and on their last day in Hong Kong they'd say, "OK, this is my final price, do you want it or don't you?" And then the cunning old Chinamen would say, "It isn't enough, I'll not sell below such-and-such a price." And of course the poor guy's exasperated by then and doesn't know what to do, because his flight leaves that evening and he's spent all that time trying to buy the vase or whatever. So he caves in, and pays the Chinaman exactly what he asked.'

'But that old school have retired now, you say?'

'All except one,' said Pendle, 'and he's the wiliest old bird of them all. When I think of the hours I wasted with Sam Lee Fu; it was like beating your head against the Great Wall of China even to get ten per cent.'

'Ten per cent doesn't sound your style, my friend.'

'But it was high at Sam Lee Fu's. I'm telling you, that man is a legend in Hong Kong. He must be slightly psychic or something, because he always knows exactly how much you want a particular piece. He's a mind-reader. None of the old bargaining tactics work on Sam. For instance it's no good putting up a "blind"; you know, pretending you're keen on a certain painting, when you're actually keen on another one, and changing horses mid-deal. Sam sees through that at once. To do business with that man is a revelation. Some of the Hong Kong millionaires send their sons along to haggle with him, because it's the quickest way of learning how to strike a hard bargain.'

Throughout this conversation Ken Witts's breath came in short, thick pants. His heart beat like a metronome, and his tongue became wet with avarice. Of course he knew at once that he must pit himself against Sam Lee Fu. For a year he had felt mildly dissatisfied with his life, and the explanation, he saw now, was lack of challenge. Britain was soft. People were pathetically willing to sell their products short. Ken Witts only had to ask for a rebate and they were tripping over each other to give him whatever he wanted. There was

no pride left, and no belief that anything had intrinsic value. Witts thought big corporations might be to blame. Nobody in Britain was trading their own, personal property any longer. Everything belonged to chains, globally branded. What did it matter to the manager of the Palace Hotel whether Ken Witts paid this price or that price, providing volume was maintained? But to a man like Sam Lee Fu it mattered. When he knocked ten per cent off the price, it was ten per cent of his own money, not some anonymous stockholder's dividend.

'What does he sell, this Sam Lee Fu?' asked Ken Witts. 'Does he have a speciality?'

'He sells everything,' said Pendle, 'but the best stuff is kept in the little alcove in Sam's own office. Paintings on silk, very old and rare some of them. Two big folders of them.'

'Pricey?'

'Well, there's the rub. There's no fixed price. You've got to agree a price with Sam. But yes, some are very pricey indeed. You're talking 140,000 Hong Kong dollars minimum, £10,000 sterling. But there are paintings in the folders for ten times that. The asking price, that is.'

ii

Ken Witts would dearly have loved to fly to Hong Kong the very next day, but he was shrewd enough to bide his time. He knew nothing about paintings on silk. If he sparred with Sam Lee Fu now, he wouldn't last one round. Even if he achieved a respectable reduction in percentage terms, he wouldn't be certain whether or not he had a bargain. Sam could start the negotiation at four times the proper price, and Ken Witts would sit there, green as a girl guide, courting humiliation.

He was acutely conscious that his joust with Sam was the great contest of his career. He had come up against some