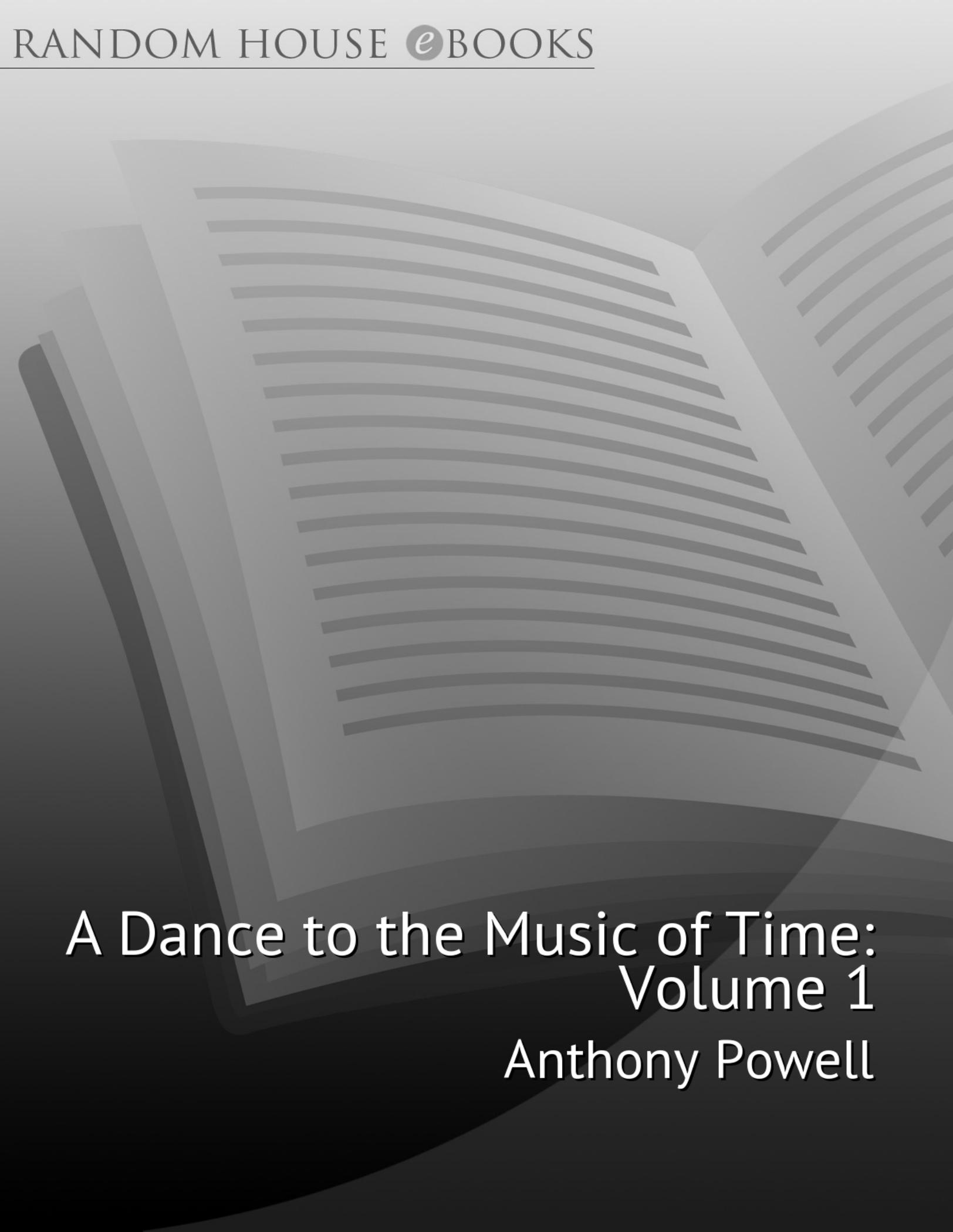


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



A Dance to the Music of Time:
Volume 1
Anthony Powell

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About the Book

Anthony Powell's brilliant twelve-novel sequence chronicles the lives of over three hundred characters, and is a unique evocation of life in twentieth-century England. It is unrivalled for its scope, its humour and the enormous pleasure it has given to generations.

These first three novels in the sequence follow Nicholas Jenkins, Kenneth Widmerpool and others, as they negotiate the intellectual, cultural and social hurdles which stand between them and the 'Acceptance World'.

About the Author

Anthony Powell was born in 1905. After working in publishing and as a scriptwriter, he began to write for the *Daily Telegraph* in the mid-1930s. He served in the army during World War II and subsequently became the fiction reviewer on the *TLS*. Next came five years as literary editor of *Punch*. He was appointed a Companion of Honour in 1988. In addition to the twelve-novel sequence, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, Anthony Powell is the author of seven other novels, and four volumes of memoirs, *To Keep the Ball Rolling*.

Also by Anthony Powell

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A Dance to the Music of Time

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Journals 1987-1989

Journals 1990-1992

A Writer's Notebook

Plays

The Garden God

The Rest I'll Whistle

Anthony Powell

**A DANCE TO THE MUSIC
OF TIME
I**

SPRING

A Question of Upbringing

A Buyer's Market

The Acceptance World



arrow books

A Question of Upbringing

For T.R.D.P.

1.

THE MEN AT work at the corner of the street had made a kind of camp for themselves, where, marked out by tripods hung with red hurricane-lamps, an abyss in the road led down to a network of subterranean drain-pipes. Gathered round the bucket of coke that burned in front of the shelter, several figures were swinging arms against bodies and rubbing hands together with large, pantomimic gestures: like comedians giving formal expression to the concept of extreme cold. One of them, a spare fellow in blue overalls, taller than the rest, with a jocular demeanour and long, pointed nose like that of a Shakespearian clown, suddenly stepped forward, and, as if performing a rite, cast some substance—apparently the remains of two kippers, loosely wrapped in newspaper—on the bright coals of the fire, causing flames to leap fiercely upward, smoke curling about in eddies of the north-east wind. As the dark fumes floated above the houses, snow began to fall gently from a dull sky, each flake giving a small hiss as it reached the bucket. The flames died down again; and the men, as if required observances were for the moment at an end, all turned away from the fire, lowering themselves laboriously into the pit, or withdrawing to the shadows of their tarpaulin shelter. The grey, undecided flakes continued to come down, though not heavily, while a harsh odour, bitter and gaseous, penetrated the air. The day was drawing in.

For some reason, the sight of snow descending on fire always makes me think of the ancient world—legionaries in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier: mountain

altars where offerings glow between wintry pillars; centaurs with torches cantering beside a frozen sea—scattered, un-co-ordinated shapes from a fabulous past, infinitely removed from life; and yet bringing with them memories of things real and imagined. These classical projections, and something in the physical attitudes of the men themselves as they turned from the fire, suddenly suggested Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance. Classical associations made me think, too, of days at school, where so many forces, hitherto unfamiliar, had become in due course uncompromisingly clear.

As winter advanced in that river valley, mist used to rise in late afternoon and spread over the flooded grass; until the house and all the outskirts of the town were enveloped in opaque, chilly vapour, tinted like cigar-smoke. The house looked on to other tenement-like structures, experiments in architectural insignificance, that intruded upon a central concentration of buildings, commanding and antiquated, laid out in a quadrilateral, though irregular, style. Silted-up residues of the years smouldered uninterruptedly—and not without melancholy—in the maroon brickwork of these medieval closes: beyond the cobbles and archways of which (in a more northerly direction) memory also brooded, no less enigmatic and inconsolable, among water-meadows

and avenues of trees: the sombre demands of the past becoming at times almost suffocating in their insistence.

Running westward in front of the door, a metalled road continued into open country of a coarser sort than these gothic parklands—fields: railway arches: a gas-works: and then more fields—a kind of steppe where the climate seemed at all times extreme: sleet: wind: or sultry heat; a wide territory, loosely enclosed by inflexions of the river, over which the smells of the gasometer, recalled perhaps by the fumes of the coke fire, would come and go with intermittent strength. Earlier in the month droves of boys could be seen drifting in bands, and singly, along this trail, migrating tribes of the region, for ever on the move: trudging into exile until the hour when damp clouds began once more to overwhelm the red houses, and to contort or veil crenellations and pinnacles beyond. Then, with the return of the mist, these nomads would reappear again, straggling disconsolately back to their deserted habitations.

By this stage of the year—exercise no longer contestable five days a week—the road was empty; except for Widmerpool, in a sweater once white and cap at least a size too small, hobbling unevenly, though with determination, on the flat heels of spiked running-shoes. Slowly but surely he loomed through the dusk towards me as I walked back—well wrapped-up, I remember—from an expedition to the High Street. Widmerpool was known to go voluntarily for ‘a run’ by himself every afternoon. This was his return from trotting across the plough in drizzle that had been falling since early school. I had, of course, often seen him before, because we were in the same house; even spoken with him, though he was a bit older than myself. Anecdotes relating to his acknowledged oddness were also familiar; but before that moment such stories had not made him live. It was on the bleak December tarmac of that Saturday afternoon in, I

suppose, the year 1921 that Widmerpool, fairly heavily built, thick lips and metal-rimmed spectacles giving his face as usual an aggrieved expression, first took coherent form in my mind. As the damp, insistent cold struck up from the road, two thin jets of steam drifted out of his nostrils, by nature much distended, and all at once he seemed to possess a painful solidarity that talk about him had never conveyed. Something comfortless and inelegant in his appearance suddenly impressed itself on the observer, as stiffly, almost majestically, Widmerpool moved on his heels out of the mist.

His status was not high. He had no colours, and, although far from being a dunce, there was nothing notable about his work. At this or any other time of year he could be seen training for any games that were in season: in winter solitary running, with or without a football: in summer, rowing 'courses' on the river, breathing heavily, the sweat clouding his thick lenses, while he dragged his rigger through the water. So far as I know he never reached even the semi-finals of the events for which he used to enter. Most of the time he was alone, and even when he walked with other boys he seemed in some way separate from them. About the house he was more noticeable than in the open air, because his voice was pitched high and he articulated poorly: as if tongue were too big for mouth. This delivery made his words always appear to protest, a manner of speaking almost predictable from his face. In addition to that distinctly noisy manner of utterance, thick rubber reinforcements on soles and heels caused his boots—he wore boots more often than what Stringham used to call 'Widmerpool's good sensible shoes'—to squeal incessantly: their shrill rhythmic bursts of sound, limited in compass like the notes of a barbaric orchestra, giving warning of his approach along the linoleum of distant passages; their sullen whining dirge seeming designed to

express in musical terms the mysteries of an existence of toil and abnegation lived apart from the daily life of the tribe. Perhaps he sounds a grotesque and conspicuous figure. In excess, Widmerpool was neither. He had his being, like many others, in obscurity. The gap in age caused most of my knowledge of him to have come second-hand; and, in spite of this abrupt realisation of him as a person that took place on that winter evening, he would have remained a dim outline to me if he had not at an earlier date, and before my own arrival, made himself already memorable, as a new boy, by wearing the wrong kind of overcoat.

At this distance of time I cannot remember precisely what sort of an overcoat Widmerpool was said to have worn in the first instance. Stories about it had grown into legend: so much so that even five or six years later you might still occasionally hear an obtrusive or inappropriate garment referred to as 'a Widmerpool'; and Templer, for example, would sometimes say: 'I am afraid I'm wearing rather Widmerpool socks today', or, 'I've bought a wonderfully Widmerpool tie to go home in'. My impression is that the overcoat's initial deviation from normal was slight, depending on the existence or absence of a belt at the back, the fact that the cut was single- or double-breasted, or, again, irregularity may have had something to do with the collar; perhaps the cloth, even, was of the wrong colour or texture.

As a matter of fact the overcoat was only remarkable in itself as a vehicle for the comment it aroused, insomuch that an element in Widmerpool himself had proved indigestible to the community. An overcoat (which never achieved the smallest notoriety) belonging to a boy called Offord whose parents lived in Madeira, where they had possibly purchased the garment, was indeed once pointed out to me as 'very like Widmerpool's'. There was on no

occasion the slightest question of Widmerpool being bullied, or even seriously ragged about the matter. On the contrary, his deviation seems scarcely to have been mentioned to him, except by cruder spirits: the coat becoming recognised almost immediately as a traditionally ludicrous aspect of everyday life. Years later, if you questioned his contemporaries on the subject, they were vague in their answers, and would only laugh and say that he wore the coat for a couple of terms; and then, by the time winter came round again, he was found to possess an overcoat of a more conventional sort.

This overcoat gave Widmerpool a lasting notoriety which his otherwise unscintillating career at school could never wholly dispel. How fully he was aware of this reputation it was hard to say. His behaviour certainly indicated that he hoped for more substantial credit with other people than to be known solely on account of a few months given over to out-of-the-way dress. If such was his aim, he was unsuccessful; and the only occasion when I heard these exertions of his receive some small amount of public recognition had been about a month before this, so to speak transcendental, manifestation of himself to me in the mist. Everyone had been summoned to the house library to listen to complaints that Parkinson, captain of games, wanted to make on the subject of general slackness. Parkinson, rather a feeble figure who blushed easily, had ended his little speech with the words: 'It is a pity that some of you are not as keen as Widmerpool.' There had been loud laughter at this. Parkinson himself grinned sheepishly, and, as usual, went red, as if he had said something that might be considered, even in his own eyes, more than a little indecent: lightly touching, as his habit was, a constellation of spots accumulated on one of his cheekbones.

Widmerpool himself had not smiled, though he could hardly have failed to notice the laughter. He had stared seriously at his boots with their thick rubber reinforcements, apparently trying to avoid any imputation of priggishness. While he did this, his fingers twitched. His hands were small and gnarled, with nails worn short and cracked, as if he spent his spare time digging with them deep down into the soil. Stringham had said that the nails of the saint who had hollowed his own grave without tools might fairly have competed against Widmerpool's in a manicure contest. If Widmerpool had not developed boils soon after this crumb of praise had been let fall, he would, by the end of the season, have scraped into the house football team. This achievement, however, was not to be; though from the moment that his ailment began to abate he was training again as hard as ever. Some more popular figure was made twelfth man.

Still pondering on this vision of Widmerpool, I entered the house, encountering in the hall its familiar exhalation of carbolic soap, airing blankets, and cold Irish stew—almost welcoming after the fog outside—and mounted the staircase towards tea. A thick black stripe of paint divided the upper, and yellow, half of the wall from the magenta dado beneath. Above this black line was another, mottled and undulating, where passers-by, up and down the stairs, rested arm or shoulder, discolouring the distemper in a slanting band of grey. Two or three boys were as usual standing in front of the notice-board on the first floor, their eyes fixed on the half-sheets of paper attached by drawing-pins to the green baize, gazing at the scrawled lists and regulations as if intent on a tape-machine liable at any moment to announce the winner. There was nothing more recent than one of the recurrent injunctions emanating from Le Bas, our housemaster, requiring that all boots should be scraped on the scraper, and then once more

scoured on the door-mat on entering the hall, to avoid dispersion of mud throughout the house. On the corner of this grubby fiat Stringham, some days before, had drawn a face in red pencil. Several pairs of eyes were now resting glassily on that outward protest against the voice of authority.

Since the beginning of the term I had messed with Stringham and Templer; and I was already learning a lot from them. Both were a shade older than myself, Stringham by about a year. The arrangement was in part a matter of convenience, dictated by the domestic economy of the house: in this case the distribution of teas. I liked and admired Stringham: Templer I was not yet sure about. The latter's boast that he had never read a book for pleasure in his life did not predispose me in his favour: though he knew far more than I of the things about which books are written. He was also an adept at breaking rules, or diverting them to ends not intended by those who had framed them. Having obtained permission, ostensibly at his parents' request, to consult an oculist, Templer was spending that day in London. It was unlikely that he would cut this visit short enough to enable him to be back in time for tea, a meal taken in Stringham's room.

When I came in, Stringham was kneeling in front of the fire, employing a paper-knife shaped like a scimitar as a toasting-fork. Without looking up, he said: 'There is a jam crisis.'

He was tall and dark, and looked a little like one of those stiff, sad young men in ruffs, whose long legs take up so much room in sixteenth-century portraits: or perhaps a younger—and far slighter—version of Veronese's Alexander receiving the children of Darius after the Battle of Issus: with the same high forehead and suggestion of hair thinning a bit at the temples. His features certainly seemed to belong to that epoch of painting: the faces in Elizabethan

miniatures, lively, obstinate, generous, not very happy, and quite relentless. He was an excellent mimic, and, although he suffered from prolonged fits of melancholy, he talked a lot when one of these splenetic fits was not upon him: and ragged with extraordinary violence when excited. He played cricket well enough to rub along: football he took every opportunity of avoiding. I accepted the piece of toast he held out towards me.

‘I bought some sausages.’

‘Borrow the frying-pan again. We can do them over the fire.’

The room contained two late eighteenth-century coloured prints of racehorses (Trimalchio and The Pharisee, with blue-chinned jockeys) which hung above a picture, cut out of one of the illustrated weeklies and framed in passe-partout, of Stringham’s sister at her wedding: the bridegroom in khaki uniform with one sleeve pinned to his tunic. Over the fireplace was a large, and distinctly florid, photograph of Stringham’s mother, with whom he lived, a beauty, and an heiress, who had remarried the previous year after parting from Stringham’s father. She was a South African. Stuck in the corner of the frame was a snapshot of the elder Stringham, an agreeable-looking man in an open shirt, smoking a pipe with the sun in his eyes. He, too, had remarried, and taken his second, and younger, wife, a Frenchwoman, to Kenya. Stringham did not often talk about his home, and in those days that was all I knew about his family; though Templer had once remarked that ‘in that direction there was a good deal of money available’, adding that Stringham’s parents moved in circles that lived ‘at a fairly rapid pace’.

I had been so struck by the conception of Widmerpool, disclosed almost as a new incarnation, shortly before on the road in front of the house, that I described, while the sausages cooked, the manner in which he had materialised

in a series of jerks out of the shadows, bearing with him such tokens of despondency. Stringham listened, perforating each of the sausages with the scimitar. He said slowly: 'Widmerpool suffers—or suffered—from contortions of the bottom. Dickinson told me that, in the days when the fags used to parade in the library at tea-time, they were all standing by the wall one evening when suddenly there were inarticulate cries. Owing to this infirmity of his, Widmerpool's legs had unexpectedly given way beneath him.'

'Did he fall?'

'He clung to the moulding of the wall, his feet completely off the ground.'

'What next?'

'He was carted off.'

'I see. Have we any mustard?'

'Now I'll tell you what I saw happen last summer,' Stringham went on, smiling to himself, and continuing to pierce the sausages. 'Peter Templer and I had—for an unaccountable reason—been watching the tail-end of some cricket, and had stopped for a drink on the way back. We found Widmerpool standing by himself with a glass of lemonade in front of him. Some of the Eleven were talking and ragging at the far end of the counter and a skinned banana was thrown. This missed its target and hit Widmerpool. It was a bull's-eye. The banana was over-ripe and it burst all over his face, knocking his spectacles sideways. His cap came off and he spilt most of the lemonade down the front of his clothes.'

'Characteristic of the Eleven's throwing-in.'

'Budd himself was responsible. Widmerpool took out his handkerchief and began to clean up the mess. Budd came down the shop, still laughing, and said: "Sorry, Widmerpool. That banana wasn't intended for you."

Widmerpool was obviously astonished to hear himself addressed by name, and so politely, by no less a person than the Captain of the Eleven—who could only have known what Widmerpool was called on account of the famous overcoat. Budd stood there smiling, showing a lot of those film-star teeth of his, and looking more than ever like the hero of an adventure story for boys.'

'That noble brow.'

'It doesn't seem to help him to pile up runs,' said Stringham, 'any more than do those fine cutting shots of his which photograph so well.'

He paused and shook his head, apparently in sadness at the thought of Budd's deficiencies as a cricketer; and then continued: 'Anyway, Budd—exuding charm at every pore—said: "I'm afraid I've made you in a bit of a mess, Widmerpool," and he stood there inspecting the havoc he had just caused. Do you know an absolutely *slavish* look came into Widmerpool's face. "I don't mind," he said, "I don't mind at all, Budd. It doesn't matter in the least."' "

Stringham's dexterity at imitating the manner in which Widmerpool talked was remarkable. He stopped the narrative to put some bread into the fat in which the sausages were frying, and, when this was done, said: 'It was as if Widmerpool had experienced some secret and awful pleasure. He had taken off his spectacles and was wiping them, screwing up his eyes, round which there were still traces of banana. He began to blow on the glasses and to rub them with a great show of good cheer. The effect was not at all what might have been hoped. In fact all this heartiness threw the most appalling gloom over the shop. Budd went back to his friends and finished whatever he was eating, or drinking, in deathly silence. The other members of the Eleven—or whoever they were—stopped laughing and began to mutter self-consciously to themselves about future fixtures. All the kick had gone out

of them. I have never seen anything like it. Then Budd picked up his bat and pads and gloves and other belongings, and said: "I must be getting along now. I've got the Musical Society tonight," and there was the usual business of "Good-night, Bill, good-night——"

"Good-night, Guy . . . good-night, Stephen . . . good-night, John . . . good-night, Ronnie . . . good-night, George . . ."

'Exactly,' said Stringham. "'Good-night, Eddie . . . good-night, Simon . . . good-night, Robin . . .'" and so on and so forth until they had all said good-night to each other collectively and individually, and shuffled off together, arm-in-arm. Templer wanted to move because he had to go down-town before lock-up; so we left Widmerpool to himself. He had put on his spectacles again, and straightened his cap, and as we went through the door he was rubbing his gritty little knuckles together, still smiling at his great encounter with Budd.'

The account of this incident, illustrating another of Widmerpool's aspects, did not at that moment make any deep impression on me. It was like a number of other anecdotes on the subject that circulated from time to time, differing only in the proficiency with which Stringham told his stories. My own renewed awareness of Widmerpool's personality seemed to me closer and more real. Stringham, however, had not finished with the matter. He said: 'As we walked past the fives courts, Templer remarked: "I'm glad that ass Widmerpool fielded a banana with his face." I asked why he did not like him—for after all there is little harm in the poor old boy—and it turned out that it was Widmerpool who got Akworth sacked.'

Stringham paused to allow this statement to sink in, while he arranged the sausages in a new pattern. I could not recall at all clearly what Akworth's story had been: though I remembered that he had left the school under a

cloud soon after my arrival there, and that various rumours regarding his misdoings had been current at the time.

‘Akworth tried to set fire to his room, didn’t he? Or did he steal everything that was not nailed down?’

‘He well may have done both,’ said Stringham; ‘but he was principally shot out for sending a note to Peter Templer. Widmerpool intercepted the note and showed it to Le Bas. I must admit that it was news to me when Peter told me.’

‘And that was why Peter had taken against Widmerpool?’

‘Not only that but Widmerpool got hold of Peter and gave him a tremendous jaw on morals.’

‘That must have been very good for him.’

‘The jaw went on for so long, and Widmerpool came so close, that Templer said that he thought Widmerpool was going to start something himself.’

‘Peter always thinks that about everybody.’

‘I agree his conceit is invincible,’ said Stringham, turning the sausages thoughtfully, as if contemplating Templer’s vanity.

‘Did Widmerpool start anything?’ I asked.

‘It is a grim thought, isn’t it?’

‘What is the answer?’

Stringham laughed. He said: ‘Peter made an absolutely typical Templer remark when I asked him the same question. He said: “No, thank God, but he moved about the room breathing heavily like my sister’s white pekinese. Did you see how pleased he was just now to be noticed by Budd? He looked as if he had just been kissed under the mistletoe. Bloody fool. He’s so wet you could shoot snipe off him.” Can you imagine a more exquisitely Templer phrase? Anyhow, that is how poor old Widmerpool looks to our little room-mate.’

‘But what is he like really?’

‘If you are not sure what Widmerpool is like,’ said Stringham, ‘you can’t do better than have another look at him. You will have an opportunity at prayers tonight. These sausages are done.’

He stopped speaking, and, picking up the paper-knife again, held it upright, raising his eyebrows, because at that moment there had been a kind of scuffling outside, followed by a knock on the door: in itself a surprising sound. A second later a wavering, infinitely sad voice from beyond said: ‘May I come in?’

Obviously this was no boy: the approach sounded unlike a master’s. The hinge creaked, and, as the door began to open, a face, deprecatory and enquiring, peered through the narrow space released between the door and the wall. There was an impression of a slight moustache, grey or very fair, and a well-worn, rather sporting tweed suit. I realised all at once, not without apprehension, that my Uncle Giles was attempting to enter the room.

I had not seen my uncle since the end of the war, when he had been wearing some sort of uniform, though not one of an easily recognisable service. This sudden appearance in Stringham’s room was an unprecedented incursion: the first time that he had found his way here. He delayed entry for a brief period, pressing the edge of the door against his head, the other side of which touched the wall: rigid, as if imprisoned in a cruel trap specially designed to catch him and his like: some ingenious snare, savage in mechanism, though at the same time calculated to preserve from injury the skin of such rare creatures. Uncle Giles’s skin was, in point of fact, not easily injured, though experience of years had made him cautious of assuming as a matter of course that his company would be welcome anywhere—anywhere, at least, where other members of his family might be gathered together. At first, therefore, he did not venture to

advance farther into the room, meekly conscious that his unexpected arrival might, not unreasonably, be regarded by the occupants as creating a pivot for potential embarrassment.

‘I was just passing through on the way to Reading,’ he said. ‘Thought I might look you up.’

He stood by the door and appeared a little dazed, perhaps overcome by the rich smell of sausages that permeated the atmosphere of the room: possibly reminding him of what might easily have been a scanty luncheon eaten earlier in the day. Why he should be going to Reading was unguessable. If he had come from London, this could hardly be termed ‘on the way’; but it might well be that Uncle Giles had not come from London. His locations were not, as a rule, made public. Stringham stood up and pushed the sausages on to a plate.

‘This is my uncle—Captain Jenkins.’

Checking the sausages with the paper-knife, Stringham said: ‘I’ll get another cup. You’ll have tea with us, won’t you?’

‘Thank you, I never take tea,’ said Uncle Giles. ‘People who eat tea waste half the afternoon. Never wanted to form the habit.’ He added: ‘Of course, I’m not speaking of *your* sort of tea.’

He looked round at us, as if for sympathy, a bit uncertain as to whether or not this declaration expressed a justifiable attitude towards tea; unsure—and with good reason—if an assertion that he made efforts, however small, to avoid waste of time would prove easily credible, even in the company in which he now found himself. We borrowed a hard chair from next door, and he sat down, blowing his nose into a bandana handkerchief in a series of little grunts.

‘Don’t let me keep you fellows from your sausages,’ he said. ‘They will be getting cold. They look damned good to me.’

Neat, and still slightly military in appearance—though he had not held a commission for at least twenty years and ‘captain’ was probably a more or less honorary rank, gazetted to him by himself and the better disposed of his relations—my father’s brother was now about fifty. His arrival that night made it clear that he had not emigrated: a suggestion put forward at one moment to explain his disappearance for a longer period than usual from public view. There had also been some rather uneasy family jokes regarding the possibility of his having overstepped the limits set by the law in the transaction of everyday business, some slip in financial dealings that might account for an involuntary absence from the scene; for Uncle Giles had been relegated by most of the people who knew him at all well to that limbo where nothing is expected of a person, and where more than usually outrageous actions are approached, at least conversationally, as if they constituted a series of practical jokes, more or less enjoyable, according to where responsibility for clearing up matters might fall. The curious thing about persons regarding whom society has taken this largely self-defensive measure is that the existence of the individual himself reaches a pitch when nothing he does can ever be accepted as serious. If he commits suicide, or murder, only the grotesque aspects of the event dominate the circumstances: on the whole, avoidance of such major issues being an integral part of such a condition. My uncle was a good example of the action of this law; though naturally I did not in those days see him with anything like this clearness of vision. If Reading were his destination, there could be no hint of immediate intention to leave the country: and, unless on ticket-of-leave, he was evidently

under no sort of legal restraint. He finished blowing his nose, pushed the handkerchief back up his sleeve, and, using without facetious implication a then popular catchword, said: 'How's your father?'

'All right.'

'And your mother?'

'Very well.'

'Good,' said Uncle Giles, as if it were a relief to him personally that my parents were well, even when the rest of the world might feel differently on the same matter.

There was a pause. I asked how his own health had been, at which he laughed scornfully.

'Oh, me,' he said, 'I've been about the same. Not growing any younger. Trouble with the old duodenal. I rather wanted to get hold of your father about signing some papers. Is he still in Paris? I suppose so.'

'That bit of the Conference is finished.'

'Where is he?'

'London.'

'On leave?'

'Yes.'

'The War Office haven't decided where they are going to send him?'

'No.'

My uncle looked put out at this piece of news. It was most unlikely, hardly conceivable, that he really intended to impose his company on my father, who had for many years discouraged close association with his brother, except when possessed with an occasional and uncontrollable desire to tell Uncle Giles to his face what he thought of him, a mood that rarely lasted more than thirty-six hours; by the end of which period of time the foredoomed inefficacy of any such contact made itself clear.

'In London, is he?' said Uncle Giles, wrinkling the dry, reddish skin at the sides of his nostrils, under which a web of small grey veins etched on his nose seemed to imply preliminary outlines for a game of noughts-and-crosses. He brought out a leather cigarette-case and—before I could prevent him—lighted a cigarette.

'Visitors are not really supposed to smoke here.'

'Oh, aren't they?' said Uncle Giles. He looked very surprised. 'Why not?'

'Well, if the place smells of smoke, you can't tell if someone else smokes too.'

'Of course you can't,' said Uncle Giles readily, blowing outward a long jet of smoke. He seemed puzzled.

'Le Bas might think a boy had been smoking.'

'Who is Le Bas?'

'Our housemaster.'

How he had managed to find the house if he were ignorant of Le Bas's identity was mysterious: even inexplicable. It was, however, in keeping with the way my uncle conducted his life that he should reach his destination without knowing the name of the goal. He continued to take small puffs at his cigarette.

'I see,' he said.

'Boys aren't allowed to smoke.'

'Quite right. Stunts the growth. It is a great mistake to smoke before you are twenty-one.'

Uncle Giles straightened his back and squared his shoulders. One had the impression that he was well aware that young people of the day could scarcely attempt to compete with the rigorous standards that had governed his own youth. He shook his head and flicked some ash on to one of the dirty plates.

'It is a hundred to one Le Bas won't come in,' said Stringham. 'I should take a chance on it.'

'Take a chance on what?' Uncle Giles asked.

'On smoking.'

'You mean I really ought to put this out?'

'Don't bother.'

'Most certainly I shall bother,' said Uncle Giles. 'I should not dream of breaking a rule of that sort. Rules are made to be obeyed, however foolish they may sometimes seem. The question is where had I best put this, now that the regulation has been broken?'

By the time my uncle had decided to extinguish the cigarette on the sole of his shoe, and throw the butt into the fire, there was not much left of it. Stringham collected the ash, which had by now found its way into several receptacles, brushing all of this also into the cinders. For the rest of tea, Uncle Giles, who, for the time being at least, had evidently dismissed from his mind the question of discussing arrangements for meeting my father, discoursed, not very lucidly, on the possibility of a moratorium in connexion with German reparations and the fall of the mark. Uncle Giles's sympathies were with the Germans. 'They work hard,' he said. 'Therefore they have my respect.' Why he had suddenly turned up in the manner was not yet clear. When tea came to an end he muttered about wanting to discuss family matters, and, after saying good-bye—for my uncle, almost effusively—to Stringham, he followed me along the passage.

'Who was that?' he asked, when we were alone together.

As a rule Uncle Giles took not the slightest interest in anyone or anything except himself and his own affairs—indeed was by this time all but incapable of absorbing even the smallest particle of information about others, unless such information had some immediate bearing on his own

case. I was therefore surprised when he listened with a show of comparative attention to what I could tell him about Stringham's family. When I had finished, he remarked:

'I used to meet his grandfather in Cape Town.'

'What was he doing there?'

'His mother's father, that was. He made a huge fortune. Not a bad fellow. Knew all the right people, of course.'

'Diamonds?'

I was familiar with detective stories in which South African millionaires had made their money in diamonds.

'Gold,' said Uncle Giles, narrowing his eyes.

My uncle's period in South Africa was one of the several stretches of his career not too closely examined by other members of his family—or, if examined, not discussed—and I hoped that he might be about to give some account of experiences I had always been warned not to enquire into. However, he said no more than: 'I saw your friend's mother once when she was married to Lord Warrington and a very good-looking woman she was.'

'Who was Lord Warrington?'

'Much older than she was. He died. Never a good life, Warrington's. And so you always have tea with young Stringham?'

'And another boy called Templer.'

'Where was Templer?' asked Uncle Giles, rather suspiciously, as if he supposed that someone might have been spying on him unawares, or that he had been swindled out of something.

'In London, having his eyes seen to.'

'What is wrong with his eyes?'

'They ache when he works.'