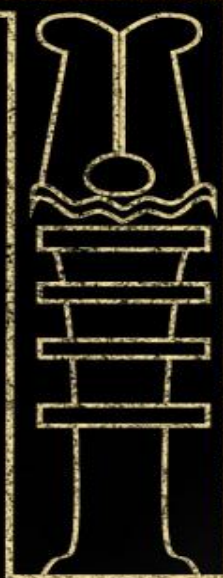




THE
MONSTER'S
LAMENT

A NOVEL

ROBERT EDRIC



About the Book

April 1945. While the Allied Forces administer the killing blow to Nazi Germany, at home London's teeming underworld of black marketeers, pimps, prostitutes, conmen and thieves prepare for the coming peace. But the man the newspapers call the English Monster, the self-proclaimed Antichrist, Aleister Crowley, is making preparations for the future too: for his immortality.

For Crowley's plan to work, he has to depend upon one of London's Most Wanted, ambitious gangland boss Tommy Fowler, who, presiding over a crumbling empire, can still get you anything you want – for a price.

And what Crowley wants is a young man, Peter Tait, in Pentonville Prison under sentence of death for murder. Convinced of his innocence but unable to prove it, his only chance of survival lies in the hands of one detective struggling against the odds to win a desperate appeal that has little chance of success.

The Monster's Lament is an extraordinary journey through a ruined landscape towards an ending more terrible and all-consuming than any of its participants can have imagined. When you're used to fighting monsters abroad, it is easy to overlook the monsters closer to home...

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About the Author
Also by Robert Edric
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THE MONSTER'S LAMENT

Robert Edric

For Gwennyth Venn

One is always wrong to open a conversation with the devil, for, however one goes about it, the devil will always insist on having the last word.

André Gide
Journals, 1917

London, April 1945

1

FRANKIE DOLL LOOKED up at the flying bomb as it made its noisy, faltering way across the cloudless sky. It was seven in the morning, and the sun was already high above the rooftops of Archer Street, filling the far side of the narrow road with its yellow light, and casting Frankie Doll and the doorway in which he stood into deep shade.

Others gathered further along the street and gazed upwards in an effort to spot the small rocket. A girl came out of the doorway beside Frankie Doll and collided with him. She, too, looked quickly up, but then turned her attention to the shoes she carried, and after that to her bare feet on the cold paving. She leaned on Frankie Doll while she pulled on her shoes.

Frankie Doll knew her from the Regency - Ruby something. Something Irish. Nolan, Dolan. Definitely an Irish accent. Red hair. Like him, she would have just worked through the night and was now leaving and on her way home. He looked down from the sky for a moment and wondered what - if anything - to say to her.

The girl fastened her straps and let go of Frankie Doll's shoulder. She asked him for a cigarette and he gave her one and lit it for her.

'Hardly right, is it?' she said, nodding upwards. 'Hardly fair. Not this far on. Not after all this time.'

At first, Frankie Doll didn't understand her.

Above them, the small, shiny rocket continued along its noisy course.

‘Everybody’s saying it’s all over bar the shouting and the reckoning,’ the girl said.

Frankie Doll remembered her name. Nolan. Ruby Nolan. He looked at her again. She probably wasn’t even twenty yet. The Irish all sounded the same to Frankie Doll. He wondered what she called herself in the club. Or perhaps Ruby was her club name. More than likely. It was a world full of Rubys and Pearls, Scarlets and Sabrinas.

‘What reckoning?’ he said.

‘You know. Slicing things up. What is it? “The Spoils of War”.’ She was pleased with the phrase and repeated it. She rubbed at a mark on her leg.

Frankie Doll finally understood her.

Above them, the flying bomb gave its first unmistakable stutter, followed by a few seconds of silence, followed then by the resumption of its engine. Frankie Doll knew something about engines. Engines and fuel. The rocket noise always sounded wrong, badly tuned, a loose piston-housing, poor fuel mixture, low grade. A burned-out fly-boy had once pointed out to Frankie Doll that it hardly mattered how good or poor the fuel was or what shape the engines were in as long as they got the rockets to roughly where they needed to be; because wherever they fell, they did their dirty work. And perhaps it was even deliberate, them sounding like that, the same fly-boy had suggested, putting the fear of God into everybody who heard the things coming and who knew what all that spluttering noise and those ominous broken silences now meant.

There was a further missed note, followed this time by a longer silence, one, two, three seconds. Frankie Doll wondered how many others would be making the same heart-stopping calculation.

‘Here we go,’ Ruby Nolan said, now standing even closer to him.

Along the street, someone called out and pointed.

Frankie Doll looked up again and saw the rocket passing directly overhead, disappearing as it crossed close to where the sun hung low in the sky, and then reappearing as it continued somewhere north over Oxford Street.

‘Not much longer now,’ Ruby Nolan said. She rubbed her hands and stamped her feet on the ground.

‘You can see it,’ Frankie Doll told her.

She glanced up, but then shrugged and looked back down again. She seemed more interested in her feet. ‘These shoes,’ she said, ‘I borrowed them. Do they suit me, do you think? Never worn heels this high before.’

Frankie Doll looked at the girl’s feet, but said nothing. He was thinking now about what she’d said – about the unfairness of people being killed this close to the war’s end. And then he looked back to where the invisible rocket continued on its way across the London sky.

‘You’d never be able to tell where it was exactly when you couldn’t see it,’ the girl said. ‘You hear it, then you don’t hear it, and then you wait. And if you hear it explode, then that’s you off the hook for another day and it makes no bloody difference either way.’

‘So do you never think about who might be on the receiving end when it isn’t you?’ Frankie Doll said to her. He strained to hear the first tell-tale note of the distant motor cutting out completely.

He’d seen pictures of the things in the newspapers. One had been carried along the Embankment on the back of a tank transporter. Somebody had painted a dragon’s face on the sharp end, making it look like a slain creature. Faulty fuse, someone had told him. A dud. Half a dozen soldiers had sat along its silver length, waving to the watching crowds as though they were on a fairground ride. Apart from a buckled fin, there hadn’t been a mark or a scratch on the rocket. Someone else in the crowd had said that the whole thing was a con, a bodge-up, propaganda. How, otherwise, would the rocket be undamaged – faulty fuse or

not – having fallen out of the sky? A nearby woman contested this by saying that it might have glided to the ground and then landed on a haystack somewhere in a field outside London. Some agreed with her; others laughed at her. Or perhaps it had come down in one of the parks, someone else suggested. This appealed more to the woman and she revised her flimsy explanation of the undamaged bomb.

‘Why should I?’ Ruby Nolan said, distracting Frankie Doll from his thoughts.

‘Why should you what?’

‘Think about who might be getting it in the neck. I hardly know anybody else here. Look after number one, that’s my motto. Ask me, it’s the best way to be. Ask me—’

But Frankie Doll was no longer listening to her.

‘It’s stopped,’ he said.

That same sun-filled, pale-blue sky was filled now with silence. The distant hum of early traffic, a few notes of birdsong, but, essentially, silence.

‘One, two, three,’ Ruby Nolan started counting.

It struck Frankie Doll only then that it was strange for the rocket to have been launched this late in the proceedings, so close to the final curtain call, so to speak – this rasping baby of a bomb after all those months of the bigger rockets with their silent arrivals and much larger and deadlier explosions.

How does that work, then? Tommy Fowler had asked him. How come you get the bang and *then* you get the noise of the bastard coming? Not right at all. It’s a trick. Must be. They send two over, that’s it – one with a silent motor, and then one a few seconds later with the usual engine and no bang. Stands to reason. Against the laws of nature, otherwise. Only one thing to be said in their favour, Tommy Fowler said – you never heard your number being called. No standing around and waiting all those long seconds, praying and wondering and working out where

you stood and what your chances were. The world was full of other poor, unlucky sods, so what were the odds if you survived and they all stayed poor and unlucky and got what was finally coming to them?

It seemed much longer to Frankie Doll, but Ruby Nolan said, 'Six.'

Along the street, the other men and women had lowered their arms and were all now waiting in silence for the explosion. Some of them, Frankie Doll saw, were braced for the blast, and some of them – and this was a dead cert – were silently praying for their own survival.

In the beginning, Frankie Doll had occasionally tried to plot the course of the bombs, guessing which districts and streets they were flying over. He calculated – or at least he convinced himself that it was a valid calculation – how much fuel was left in the rocket's tank by the noise it made. And then how much further it had to fly – either towards him or away from him – by that same note. And then – and this, he understood, was a considerably more reliable calculation – he worked out how much flight was left in the rocket once it began its faltering descent. Some arrived roaring vigorously and then fell suddenly silent – vertical descent, Frankie Doll reckoned – and others flew stopping and starting for minutes at a time before continuing on their way or beginning their slower, more gentle fall from the sky.

'Seven,' Ruby Nolan said, again interrupting Frankie Doll's thoughts, and the instant she said it, they both heard the distant explosion.

'North,' Frankie Doll said. 'Hendon, Finchley way.'

'Wherever it is,' Ruby said, 'five bob says it won't be Buckingham Palace. And another five bob says that none of that mob will have been within fifty miles of it.'

Frankie Doll heard the cold note of spite in her voice and wondered if this had something to do with her being Irish.

'I suppose not,' he said. He searched along the roofline for any sign of smoke, but already knew by the muted sound of the explosion that the bomb had fallen some miles away. There were no after-noises - no falling masonry, no screams or cries, no crackle of rising flames - only the returning silence of that spring morning.

'Got another?' Ruby said. She dropped the last inch of her cigarette to the ground and rubbed at it with her shoe.

Frankie Doll took out his packet.

'You got family in that direction?' she asked him.

'Got no family whatsoever in any direction,' Frankie Doll said, which was true.

'Only got yourself to worry about, then,' she said, taking two cigarettes from the pack and slipping one into her pocket. 'What will you do?'

'Do?'

'After all this malarkey. When it's all over and done with.' She nodded at the doorway behind them. 'I mean, this place is hardly going to be the same, is it? Not once the Yanks get their marching orders and our own lot get shipped back home.'

'I suppose not,' Frankie Doll said.

Tommy Fowler was already talking about the days ahead. But according to Tommy Fowler, things could only get better, not worse. A thousand laws and regulations would soon be relaxed. No war, no more worries about all those petty restrictions and regulations which were a blight on his current existence. People like you and me, Frankie boy, people like you and me - that's who the future was invented for. We're on our toes, you and me, we know what to expect, we've seen this coming a long way off.

And all Frankie Doll had been able to do was nod vigorously and agree with everything Tommy Fowler had said. Because that was how things worked with Tommy Fowler. Because Tommy Fowler was life and death to Frankie Doll. And even if Frankie Doll had known for

certain that Tommy Fowler was wrong, that things were now changing in ways Tommy Fowler would never understand in a thousand years, then Frankie Doll would still have kept his mouth shut and said nothing. Because that was how things worked with Tommy Fowler.

Along the street, someone shouted, and then several others started cheering. Three men and a woman linked arms and danced in a clumsy circle in the road, encouraged and applauded by those who watched them.

‘Pathetic,’ Ruby Nolan said. ‘It missed them, that’s all. You ever see those pictures of Dresden?’

Frankie Doll nodded.

‘Why try to keep them a secret? So what? Street I lived in near Belfast docks, house took a bomb that killed seven children – seven, and two of them unweaned babies. Mother and father survived, but all seven kids were blasted to smithereens.’

‘It sounds—’ Frankie Doll started to say.

‘It sounds exactly like it was. A bomb out of nowhere doing what bombs out of nowhere do.’ She made an explosion with her hands.

This time Frankie Doll wanted to ask her if her lack of sympathy had something to do with her upbringing. He knew that most Irishmen hated most Englishmen, and vice versa. Paddies, Micks and bogtrotters, Tommy Fowler called them – even his so-called Irish friends, and there had been a good number of those over the past six years. But instead, he said, ‘It sounds like something you’d never recover from. Losing all those kids, and especially like that.’

‘You’d think so,’ Ruby Nolan said.

Frankie Doll took several paces into the street, stepping from the cool of the shadow into the surprising warmth of the sun. He closed his eyes and held his face to the sky. He’d been at the club for twelve hours. Tommy Fowler had made an appearance around midnight, patted him on the

back, counted the takings and then left less than an hour later.

Along the street, the small, impromptu celebration ended. People were alive, that was all; they'd been alive a minute earlier and they were still alive now.

'Are you walking?' Ruby called to him. She followed him into the sunlight and shielded her eyes.

Once out of the shadow, she looked much younger to Frankie Doll, a child almost.

All tastes and predilections, preferences and perversions catered for. Another one of Tommy Fowler's.

One of the men from along the road came to where Frankie Doll and Ruby Nolan stood.

'We live to fight another day,' he said to Ruby, clearly expecting her to share his relief.

'The thing was always going where it was always going,' she said, disappointing him.

'I did my bit for King and country,' he said to her. 'Invalided out after Dunkirk.'

'Then you didn't do anything for long,' she said. 'And I bet you spent most of that time running one way and looking the other.'

The man was unprepared for this. 'You're Irish,' he said.

'So?'

The man turned to Frankie Doll. 'You with her, are you?' he said, his meaning clear.

'What if he is?' Ruby Nolan said to him.

Having received no acknowledgement from Frankie Doll, the man was now less certain of himself and he backed away from the pair of them.

'That's right,' Ruby Nolan shouted at him. 'Run away. Again.' She spat at the ground close to the man's feet.

'You and her ...' the man said to Frankie Doll.

'Me and her, what?'

'She's a tart, that's what.'

Ruby Nolan laughed at him. 'And you're wishing that you'd come across me all alone and that your brave new friends weren't watching you now.'

Frankie Doll saw by the man's reaction that she was right. 'Just go back to them,' he said.

'Or else what?' the man said.

'Or else this,' Frankie Doll said, and he swiftly and deftly took a knife from his pocket, opened out its slender six-inch blade and pointed it directly at the man's face.

'Jesus Christ,' the man said.

Ruby Nolan laughed again. 'No good shouting for him. He won't help you. Not twice in one morning.'

'Just get back to your happy-to-be-alive friends,' Frankie Doll told him. 'Buy a paper later, see where the rocket landed and who it killed instead of you, and perhaps then you'll feel even luckier and you can celebrate all over again.'

The man finally turned and walked away from the two of them.

'I could have handled him,' Ruby Nolan said.

Frankie Doll closed the knife and put it back in his pocket.

'You walking?' she said.

'Might as well,' Frankie Doll said.

2

JOSHUA SILVER STEPPED back from the window and turned to the man behind him. 'Sounded like a bomb,' he said. 'Or perhaps just some building or other finally giving up the ghost and collapsing.' He watched as the torn and yellowing net curtain fell back into place. On either side of the window, the heavy drapes hung equally dilapidated, faded by the light and stained with smoke and a multitude of hands. 'But why now?' he said, resuming their interrupted conversation.

The man behind him laughed at his concerns.

'Surely you must still know someone who knows you, who you are, *what* you are, someone still concerned enough to care, someone with the' - Joshua Silver rubbed his forefinger and thumb together to emphasize the point - '*wherewithal* to make these last few years more ... more ...'

'Comfortable?' his companion said. 'Anonymous? Dreary? Endless? Pointless?'

'I was going to say bearable,' Silver said, provoking more low laughter.

'How very *genteel*.'

'You deserve better than this hovel.'

'According to most of the world, and certainly most of this country and its kow-towing, lickspittle, lap-dog press, I deserve all I get, and much, much more. In fact, I don't doubt for one minute that there won't be a day of national rejoicing when I die on this Earth and depart to another,

hopefully more rewarding, obliging, appreciative and grateful realm.'

Joshua Silver had heard it all before, but he still flinched at the words. 'But you're—'

'I'm Aleister Crowley,' Aleister Crowley shouted, as though this explained everything, which, as Joshua Silver knew only too well, it usually did. 'And if my baptized name is not enough, then you only have to flick through the dreary pages of that same self-regarding, pocket-lining press to find a dozen further and considerably more appreciated epithets.'

"'The Great Beast'," Joshua Silver said absently. It always sounded too overblown and melodramatic a title.

'See - even *you* have absorbed the trash.' Crowley paused and coughed, taking a minute to clear his throat and then to regain his breath and composure, massaging his chest and then his neck to aid this. 'I ask you - you, Joshua Silver - do I, in any shape or form, look like the Antichrist to you?'

'You look like what you are,' Silver said. 'An old and ailing man.'

'Seventy,' Crowley said. 'Three score and ten. My allegedly allotted span. Tell me, you being a doctor - your discredited expulsion from that august, though equally self-satisfied profession notwithstanding - is that what people still expect? Seventy years? Because if it is, then they're soon enough going to be expecting a lot more. They've survived, they *deserve* more, they deserve *better*. Soon they're going to want at least another decade on top of that, then they'll want to live to a hundred, and then—'

'And after that they'll want what you—' Silver stopped abruptly and looked back to where Crowley sat in the overstuffed armchair in the corner of the room, a dim lamp beside him, a cold fire at his feet, its ashes and a few pieces of unburned wood spilled on to the threadbare rug in front of it.

‘What I want ...’ Crowley said. But there was neither anger nor reproach in his voice, and Silver heard this.

‘All I meant ...’ Silver said.

‘You’re my old and trusted colleague,’ Crowley said. ‘I know *exactly* what you meant, as clearly as I understood your intent – would “warning” be more appropriate, do you think? – in making the remark.’

‘“Old and trusted”?’ Silver said. ‘You make me sound like a dog.’

Crowley smiled at the words. ‘No, not a dog,’ he said.

Silver moved closer to the old man, to the table upon which he had placed his doctor’s bag, pushing aside the unwashed crockery and glasses which filled the surface. He opened the bag and took out a stethoscope.

In response to this, Crowley unwound his scarf, opened the heavy, embroidered dressing gown he wore and then unfastened a button of his pyjama jacket. A greying vest showed through the gap, and he pulled this up to reveal the soft, pale flesh beneath.

Silver went to him, rubbing the pad of his stethoscope against the palm of his hand.

‘You seem nervous,’ Crowley said.

‘Perhaps because I already know what I’m going to hear,’ Silver told him.

‘A heart?’ Crowley smiled at the old joke.

‘A failing heart.’

‘Then why listen?’

Silver pushed the disc against Crowley’s chest and told him to stop talking. He moved the stethoscope a few inches left and right, closing his eyes as he silently counted the slow and erratic beats. He finally withdrew and then refastened Crowley’s buttons himself.

‘Well?’ Crowley said. ‘Is it still beating? Am I to go marching on into the godforsaken future the same fit and virile man I once was for all eternity?’ He drew his dressing gown together and let the scarf fall back over his chest. On

his head he wore a small tasselled Turkish cap, and he readjusted this as Silver withdrew from him.

'Ataturk himself gave me this,' Crowley said.

'I believe you already told me that a hundred times.'

'And these slippers.' Crowley raised his feet from the fender on which they rested, groaning slightly at the effort.

'See,' Silver said. 'You can't even lift your feet without it causing you some pain.'

Crowley considered this and then lowered his feet, drawing them closer to him. 'Is there any coal left?'

Silver laughed. 'You haven't had any coal all winter. Salvaged wood, that's all, rafters, joists, laths.'

'Silver linings, eh?' Crowley said. It was another old joke between the pair of them.

'If you say so,' Silver said.

'I do,' Crowley said. 'What, you expect me to show a little more gratitude, appreciation?'

'They pulled enough corpses out with the floorboards.'

'And if you believe the press, then I'd probably rather burn those than the wood.'

Silver shook his head at the words. 'All that's in the past. People have had other things to worry about for a long time now.'

'Haw Haw said it was incumbent upon me to hold a Black Mass in Westminster Abbey. I do believe Horatio Bottomley devoted a whole edition of his filthy rag to exhorting me to do the same, to see where it got me.'

'That was before—'

'Before he knew the war was won, before he sniffed *that* particular wind and the stink blowing on it.'

'He's another one,' Silver said. 'Haw Haw.'

'Whatever he is, he's certainly going to feel a little tight around the collar before too long. Unless he believes he still has time to make some kind of deal.'

'The authorities won't countenance—'

‘I was thinking of an altogether higher power,’ Crowley said.

‘Well, whichever way the wind blows, he’s going to be swinging in it.’

‘What a turn of phrase you have,’ Crowley said, smiling. He motioned to a tray on the crowded table, and Silver poured them both a cup of tepid tea, after taking out his handkerchief and wiping the rims of both cups.

‘No milk or sugar, I’m afraid,’ Crowley said. ‘Not even a squeeze of lemon or a drop of opium or ether to add a shine to our day.’

‘It’s scarcely even tea,’ Silver said, sipping the bitter liquid and pulling a face.

‘You must adapt, doctor. Adapt and survive. Adapt, change, bend in the wind, shift with circumstance.’

‘Fine words from the once wealthy to the newly impoverished.’

‘I lived according to my means,’ Crowley said. ‘That’s all. Exactly as I am doing now.’

‘But now you’re old and your health is failing.’

Crowley sipped his own tea as though it were delicious. He licked his lips and let out a long breath. ‘Which is precisely why I called you here today.’

‘You didn’t call me,’ Silver said. ‘How? I was coming anyway; I come every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.’

‘And today is?’

‘Wednesday.’

‘Of course. How fastidious you remain.’

‘To know what day of the week it is?’

‘To insist on everyone else acknowledging the fact.’ Crowley took another sip.

Silver knew better than to contest the ridiculous point. He had known Crowley for seven years now, ever since their failed Wandsworth Road enterprise. And whereas almost all of his other friends and colleagues had deserted Silver after his disgrace and downfall, Crowley had

remained. Silver knew it was an unequal alliance – he would sometimes say ‘friendship’ – but it was one he accepted and had come to appreciate and depend upon.

‘So tell me,’ he said.

‘Tell you what?’

‘Why I was summoned into your holy presence amid these regal surroundings.’

‘Because I have a scheme,’ Crowley said.

Another scheme, Silver thought. ‘To make money – or should I say, to dupe someone out of *their* money – to lure another so-called benefactor? Someone prepared to make your remaining time on Earth – in *this* realm – considerably more comfortable than it appears to be at present?’

‘None of those things,’ Crowley said, smiling again. ‘Though the latter might prove to be a not inconsiderable consequence of ... of ...’ He trailed off into a cloud of reverie – something else with which Joshua Silver was also long familiar.

‘A consequence of your “scheme”?’

‘Of my scheme, yes.’ Crowley cupped a hand to his mouth, breathed heavily into it and then sniffed at this.

‘Periodontal disease,’ Silver told him. ‘Poor dental hygiene. You should clean your teeth; drink a glass of water every so often.’

‘Water?’ Crowley pulled a face and sipped his tea again. His teeth were yellow, some brown, and a few were missing, making those that remained ever more prominent in the tightening flesh of his face.

‘It wouldn’t kill you,’ Silver said. He sniffed the other sour odours of the room – old food, damp, mould, burned gas, unwashed clothes, dirt, stale air – and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

‘Are you about to recite your litany?’ Crowley said.

Silver understood him and said nothing.

‘Crabs, phlebitis, gallstones, recurrent migraines, ditto malaria, intermittent neuralgia, uncontrollable flatulence,

enteric fever, congestion of the throat, asthma, to say nothing of the whole galaxy of aches and pains, failures and seizures that the ageing flesh is heir to. Did I miss anything out?’

‘A diseased liver?’ Silver said. ‘Incipient and all too obvious dipsomania?’

‘Ah, yes, that.’

‘And your flatulence is not uncontrollable, merely something you indulge.’

‘Ah. And I never even mentioned my paranoia, my arrogance and my egotism, all similarly indulged at considerable expense to others.’

‘None of which, strictly speaking, are medical conditions – at least not conditions that fall within my own sphere of expertise and practice. Nothing upon which I might confidently ...’ Silver stopped speaking and turned away from Crowley, looking back to the window and the dim light it framed. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

After this, neither man spoke for a moment, and the room filled with the heavy ticking of the mantel clock.

‘Nor did I mention my testicular varicocele,’ Crowley said eventually, causing Silver to smile. ‘China,’ he went on. ‘The malaria. Or it might have been India. Or Egypt. Probably Egypt.’

‘You were a young, healthy man then,’ Silver said.

‘And I’m not now?’

‘The flesh ...’

‘It’s why I lost most of my friends and acquaintances – my paranoia and arrogance.’

‘Not to forget your egotism.’ Silver wondered if Crowley had left the word unspoken so that he might say it, another of their slender yet unbreakable bonds.

‘Of course. My egotism.’

Six years earlier, Joshua Silver had been exposed, accused, tried and found guilty of gross professional misconduct. After which he had been struck from the

medical register. He had known Crowley only a few months when Crowley had introduced him to a man called Dyer, like Crowley an ethyl addict. Silver was in debt and Dyer had loaned him money at extortionate, unpayable rates of interest. At the end of those few months, Silver had been persuaded by Dyer into perpetrating a medical fraud whereby all of Silver's debts and associated concerns would evaporate.

It was a simple plan, and for six months it worked. Any patient presenting to Silver with abdominal pains he diagnosed as suffering from acute appendicitis. He then arranged for an operation to be undertaken, before which the patient would attend Silver's Wandsworth Road surgery and be given a preliminary anaesthetic there while the ambulance was called for. Silver would make an incision and then immediately stitch this back up in his own examination room once the patient was unconscious. The patient would then 'recover' from this anaesthetic in the same room, having been supposedly returned there by the same non-existent ambulance. If any of the sufferers expressed surprise at what had happened, then Silver told them that everything had been planned and carried out to keep their anxiety and pain to a minimum. The 'preliminary', relaxing anaesthetic, he would explain, was in fact the actual operating anaesthetic, and the ambulance was already outside waiting while this took effect. When the stitching was complete, a painkilling injection was given directly into the abdominal wall; sometimes a few punches achieved the expected bruising. A further week-long course of much weaker painkillers was prescribed, by which time the original pain, whatever its cause, had usually ended. Besides, Silver always reassuringly pointed out, some continuing pain and discomfort was only to be expected after such an operation. When patients said they expected to have to remain in hospital to recuperate, Silver would equally convincingly explain to them that modern

medical opinion no longer considered this necessary or desirable. Besides, that was where the true cost of the operation lay. Any insistent or suspicious victims were then prodded and poked around their recent stitching to distract them.

In the eventual court case, twenty-three patients testified against Silver. It was widely expected that he would be imprisoned, but his sentence was handed down on the day after war was declared, and he was instead struck off the register and told by the judge to somehow redeem himself in the difficult years ahead.

When he looked back from the window, Crowley was watching him.

‘I—’ Silver began.

Crowley raised a hand to stop him. ‘I know,’ he said.

‘I never got my chance,’ Silver said.

‘To atone?’

‘In this lot. I put my name down for everything going. I offered my services for free – you can imagine what a joke that was to most of them. I offered to swill floors, to dig latrines. I applied for a job burning medical waste at Saint Thomas’s. I wasn’t even considered trustworthy enough for that.’

‘I know,’ Crowley said. ‘I know. We are both, in our own ways, wasted men.’

‘“Wasted”?’

‘Our potential, our capabilities, the challenges we might once have met, the desires and ambitions we might once have pursued and fulfilled.’

Silver smiled and shook his head at the melodramatic words, but at the same time acknowledging the kindness they contained. ‘And so here we are,’ he said. ‘“A wrack line of Humanity washed up on the shores of History”.’

‘Haw Haw again?’ Crowley said.

‘Churchill.’

‘That bare-faced liar? Wait until the elections.’

‘They’d make him King if they could,’ Silver said.

Crowley shook his head. ‘You just wait.’

‘But the man on the street—’

Crowley laughed at the phrase. ‘The man on the street? The man on the street? You forget, my dear doctor, that I, too, have had countless encounters with that so-called man on the street, and let me tell you, that so-called good, honest, God-fearing, decent, salt-of-the-earth man on the street is as petty, as prejudiced, as self-serving and as greedy as the rest of us.’

‘You and I included?’ Silver said.

‘I’m afraid so. I’m afraid so.’

Silver finally put down his undrunk tea and dropped his stethoscope back into his bag. He still carried this with him everywhere he went. When, occasionally, people asked him if he was a doctor, he would laugh and joke with them and tell them that he had retired only a few weeks earlier and that old habits died hard. Sometimes he added one or two darker remarks – the things he had recently endured, the things he had seen, things he had been called upon to do that had once been unimaginable to him – and people would tell him that they understood him perfectly and would wish him a happy retirement. What was it, a cottage in the country somewhere, a village green, a garden full of flowers and vegetables and a clutch of grandchildren and grateful ex-patients forever filling his days? Something like that, he would say, something like that, and then he would edge away from them back into that surrounding emptiness he now inhabited.

‘Are you leaving?’ Crowley asked him.

Silver looked at his watch. ‘I have other – I mean – things to do, people to see, all that.’

‘Of course,’ Crowley said. ‘However – my scheme. Surely I mentioned it to you before you insisted on listening to the music of my dying heart.’

‘Your arrhythmia,’ Silver said. ‘Not entirely uncommon in men of—’

‘My abused and ravaged state?’

‘Your age.’

‘But I’m immortal,’ Crowley said, laughing. ‘Don’t you read the papers? Don’t you listen to me?’

Silver put his bag back on the table.

‘Are you not drinking your tea?’ Crowley asked him, reaching for the cup, his small, ringed finger already raised in expectation.

3

LAURA FELT THE man's leg press slowly but deliberately against her own. On the other side of her, the second man moved away from her slightly, but then stayed firmly where he sat. The plush of the seat felt warm against Laura's skin.

'You seem a friendly enough sort of girl,' the man with the pressing, testing leg said to her.

'That's me,' Laura said to him. 'Friendly enough.'

The man seized on the remark, which he mistook for more than the practised encouragement it was.

'Is that friendly enough, or *more* than friendly enough?' he said.

Laura caught the glance he exchanged with the second man.

'Depends,' she said. She picked up her glass and waited for both men to do the same. 'A toast,' she said. 'To friendly people everywhere. A proper toast, down in one.' She possessed a whole array of similar ploys and techniques. *Drink, drink, drink*, Tommy Fowler always said. *That's where the money is*.

'To friendly people,' the first man said.

Laura's glass had already been filled when it arrived on the tray, and the young waitress who had put it in front of her had kept her finger on the slender stem until Laura picked it up. Water. Then the champagne bottle filled with a mixture of cheap sweet wine and soda water had been put down and the waitress had filled the other two glasses by pouring from a foot above them in an effort to create at

least the semblance of celebratory bubbles. Besides, who remembered what real champagne actually tasted like? Who had even been able to afford that champagne when it *had* been available? And who *wouldn't* want champagne now that everybody was ready and waiting and desperate to celebrate? It sometimes felt, Laura had said only the previous day to Frankie Doll, as though the whole world was holding its breath, bursting to let it out and to shout. And Frankie Doll had said that he supposed so.

'It's already opened,' one of the men had complained as the drink was poured.

'Club policy,' Laura said.

'Policy?'

'Put your eye out, a cork like that.' They must surely have known that it wasn't real champagne – real anything – and that they were as trapped and as complicit in the deceit as she and the waitress were.

'That's right,' the waitress said. 'We can't go popping our corks left, right and centre, now can we?'

Both men laughed at the remark and picked up their glasses. A single sip, whatever their response, and the bottle was paid for. No argument.

They drained their glasses, both clearly disappointed with what they had been given. They shared another glance. The man who sat with his leg against Laura's lightly touched her thigh and then motioned for her to refill the two empty glasses.

'Down in one, you said.' He tapped the rim of his glass against Laura's, which remained almost full.

'It's two in the morning,' Laura said. 'I'm already half-cut. You don't want me passing out on you, do you?'

'Half-cut?' the second man said anxiously.

Laura understood him perfectly and smiled at him. 'But still friendly,' she said. She winked at him. 'If you catch my drift.'