

Prologue

WHEN April with its sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root, and bathed every vein of earth with that liquid by whose power the flowers are engendered; when the zephyr, too, with its dulcet breath, has breathed life into the tender new shoots in every copse and on every heath, and the young sun has run half his course in the sign of the Ram, and the little birds that sleep all night with their eyes open give song (so Nature prompts them in their hearts), then, as the poet Geoffrey Chaucer observed many years ago, folk long to go on pilgrimages. Only, these days, professional people call them conferences.

The modern conference resembles the pilgrimage of medieval Christendom in that it allows the participants to indulge themselves in all the pleasures and diversions of travel while appearing to be austerely bent on self-improvement. To be sure, there are certain penitential exercises to be performed—the presentation of a paper, perhaps, and certainly listening to the papers of others. But with this excuse you journey to new and interesting places, meet new and interesting people, and form new and interesting relationships with them; exchange gossip and confidences (for your well-worn stories are fresh to them, and vice versa); eat, drink and make merry in their company every evening; and yet, at the end of it all, return home with an enhanced reputation for seriousness of mind. Today's conferees have an additional advantage over the pilgrims of old in that their expenses are usually paid, or at least subsidised, by the institution to which they belong, be it a government department, a commercial firm, or, most commonly perhaps, a university.

There are conferences on almost everything these days, including the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. If, like his hero Troilus at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, he looks down from the eighth sphere of heaven on

*This title spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is*

and observes all the frantic traffic around the globe that he and other great writers have set in motion—the jet trails that criss-cross the oceans, marking the passage of scholars from one continent to another, their paths converging and intersecting and passing, as they hasten to hotel, country house or ancient seat of learning, there to confer and carouse, so that English and other academic subjects may be kept up—what does Geoffrey Chaucer think?

Probably, like the spirit of Troilus, that chivalrous knight and disillusioned lover, he laughs heartily at the spectacle, and considers himself well out of it. For not all conferences are happy, hedonistic occasions; not all conference venues are luxurious and picturesque; not all Aprils, for that matter, are marked by sweet showers and dulcet breezes.

Part I

One

"APRIL is the cruellest month," Persse McGarrigle quoted silently to himself, gazing through grimy windowpanes at the unseasonable snow crusting the lawns and flowerbeds of the Rummidge campus. He had recently completed a Master's dissertation on the poetry of T. S. Eliot, but the opening words of *The Waste Land* might, with equal probability, have been passing through the heads of any one of the fifty-odd men and women, of varying ages, who sat or slumped in the raked rows of seats in the same lecture-room. For they were all well acquainted with that poem, being University Teachers of English Language and Literature, gathered together here, in the English Midlands, for their annual conference, and few of them were enjoying themselves.

Dismay had been already plainly written on many faces when they assembled the previous evening for the traditional sherry reception. The conferees had, by that time, acquainted themselves with the accommodation provided in one of the University's halls of residence, a building hastily erected in 1969, at the height of the boom in higher education, and now, only ten years later, looking much the worse for wear. They had glumly unpacked their suitcases in study-bedrooms whose cracked and pitted walls retained, in a pattern of rectangular fade marks, the traces of posters hurriedly removed (sometimes with portions of plaster adhering to them) by their youthful owners at the commencement of the Easter vacation. They had appraised the stained and broken furniture, explored the dusty interiors of cupboards in vain for coat-hangers, and tested the narrow beds, whose springs sagged dejectedly in the middle, deprived of all resilience by the battering of a decade's horseplay and copulation. Each room had a washbasin, though not every washbasin had a plug," or every plug a chain. Some taps could not be turned on, and some could not be turned off. For more elaborate ablutions, or to answer a call of nature, it was necessary to venture out into the draughty and labyrinthine corridors in search of one of the communal washrooms, where baths, showers and toilets were to be found- but little privacy, and unreliable supplies of hot water.

To veterans of conferences held in British provincial universities, these were familiar discomforts and, up to a point, stoically accepted; as was the rather inferior sherry served at the reception (a little-known brand that seemed to protest too much its Spanish origins by the lurid depiction of a bullfight and a flamenco dancer on the label); as was the dinner which awaited them afterwards—tomato soup, roast beef and two vegetables, jam tart with custard—from every item of which all trace of flavour had been conscientiously removed by prolonged cooking at high temperatures. More than customary aggravation was generated by the discovery that the conference would be sleeping in one building, eating in another, and meeting for lectures and discussions on the main campus, thus ensuring for all concerned a great deal of tiresome walking to and fro on paths and pavements made dangerous and unpleasant by the snow. But the real source of depression, as the conferees gathered for the sherry, and squinted at the little white cardboard lapel badges on which each person's name, and university, were neatly printed, was the paucity and, it must be said, the generally undistinguished quality of their numbers. Within a very short time they had established that none of the stars of the profession was in residence—no one, indeed, whom it would be worth travelling ten miles to meet, let alone the hundreds

that many had covered. But they were stuck with each other for three days: three meals a day, three bar sessions a day, a coach outing and a theatre visit-long hours of compulsory sociability; not to mention the seven papers that would be delivered, followed by questions and discussion. Long before it was all over they would have sickened of each other's company, exhausted all topics of conversation, used up all congenial seating arrangements at table, and succumbed to the familiar conference syndrome of bad breath, coated tongue and persistent headache, that came from smoking, drinking and talking five times as much as normal. The foreknowledge of the boredom and distemper to which they had condemned themselves lay like a cold, oppressive weight on their bowels (which would also be out of order before long) even as they sought to disguise it with bright chatter and hearty bonhomie, shaking hands and clapping backs, gulping down their sherry like medicine. Here and there people could be seen furtively totting up the names on the conference list. Fifty-seven, including the non-resident home team, was a very disappointing turn-out.

So Persse McGarrigle was assured, at the sherry party, by a melancholy-looking elderly man sipping a glass of orange juice into which his spectacles threatened to slide at any moment. The name on his lapel badge was "Dr Rupert Sutcliffe", and the colour of the badge was yellow, indicating that he was a member of the host Department.

"Is that right?" Persse said. "I didn't know what to expect. It's the very first conference I've ever been to."

"UTE conferences vary a lot. It all depends on where it's held. At Oxford or Cambridge you would expect at least a hundred and fifty. I told Swallow nobody would come to Rummidge, but he wouldn't listen."

"Swallow?"

"Our Head of Department." Dr Sutcliffe seemed to have some difficulty in forcing these words between his teeth. "He claimed it would put Rummidge on the map if we offered to host the conference. Delusions of grandeur, I'm afraid." "Was it Professor Swallow who was giving out the little badges?" "No, that's Bob Busby, he's just as bad. Worse, if anything. Been beside himself with excitement for weeks, organizing outings and so forth. I should think we'll lose a pretty penny on this affair," Dr Sutcliffe concluded, with evident satisfaction, looking over his glasses at the half-filled room. "Hallo, Rupert, old man! A bit thin on the ground, aren't we?" A man of about forty, dressed in a bright blue suit, hit Sutcliffe vigorously between the shoulder blades as he pronounced these words, causing the latter's spectacles to fly off the end of his nose. Persse caught them neatly and returned them to their owner.

"Oh, it's you, Dempsey" said Sutcliffe, turning to face his assailant.

"Only fifty-seven on the list, and a lot of them haven't turned up, by the look of it," said the newcomer, whose lapel badge identified him as Professor Robin Dempsey, from one of the new universities in the north of England. He was a broad-shouldered, thickset man, with a heavy jaw that jutted aggressively, but his eyes, small and set too close together, seemed to belong to some other person, more anxious and vulnerable, trapped inside the masterful physique. Rupert Sutcliffe did not seem overjoyed to see Professor Dempsey, or disposed to share with him his own pessimism about the conference.

"I dare say a lot of people have been held up by the snow," he said coldly. "Shocking weather for April. Excuse me, I see Busby waving urgently. I expect the potato crisps have run out, or some such crisis." He shuffled off.

"God!" said Dempsey, looking round the room. "What a shower! Why did I come?" The question sounded rhetorical, but Dempsey proceeded to answer it at some length, and without apparently pausing for breath. "I'll tell you why, I came because I have family here, it seemed a good excuse to see them. My children, actually. I'm divorced, you see. I used to work here, in this Department, believe it or not. Christ, what a retarded lot they were, still are by the look of it. The same old faces. Nobody ever seems to move. Old Sutcliffe, for instance, been here forty years, man and boy. Naturally I got out as soon as I could. No place for an ambitious man. The last straw was when they gave a senior lectureship to Philip Swallow instead of me, though I had three books out by then, and he'd published practically nothing. Now—you wouldn't credit it—they've gone and given him the Chair here, and he's still published practically nothing. There's supposed to be a book about Hazlitt - *Hazlitt*, I ask you - it was announced last year, but I've never seen a single review of it. Can't be much good. Well, anyway, as soon as they gave Swallow the senior lectureship, I said to Janet, right, that's it, we're off, put the house up for sale, we're going to Darlington—they'd been wooing me for some time. A Readership straight away, and a free hand to develop my special interests -linguistics and stylistics—they always hated that sort of thing here, blocked me at every turn, talked to students behind my back, persuaded them to drop my courses, I was glad to shake the dust of Rummidge off my feet, I can tell you. That was ten years ago, Darlington was small in those days, still is, I suppose, but it was a challenge, and the students are quite good, you'd be surprised. Anyway, I was happy enough, but unfortunately Janet didn't like it, took against the place as soon as she saw it. Well, the campus is a bit bleak in winter, outside the town, you know, on the edge of the moors, and mostly prefabricated huts in those days, it's better now, we've got rid of the sheep and our Metallurgy building won a prize recently, but at the time, well, anyway, we couldn't sell the house here, there was a freeze on mortgages, so Janet decided to stay on in Rummidge for a while, we thought it would be better for the kids anyway, Desmond was in his last year at junior school, so I commuted, came home every weekend, well, nearly every weekend, it was a bit hard on Janet, hard on me, too, of course, and then I met this girl, a postgraduate student of mine, well, you can appreciate that I was pretty lonely up there, it was inevitable when you come to think of it, I said to Janet, it was inevitable-she found out about the girl, you see ..."

He broke off, frowning into his sherry glass. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said, shooting a slightly resentful look at Persse, who had been puzzled on the same score for several minutes. "I don't even know who you are." He bent forward to read Persse's lapel badge. "University College, Limerick, eh?" he said, with a leer. "*There was a young lecturer from Limerick* . . . I suppose everyone says that to you."

"Nearly everyone," Persse admitted. "But, you know, they very seldom get further than the first line. There aren't many rhymes to 'Limerick'."

"What about 'dip his wick'?" said Dempsey, after a moment's reflection. "That should have possibilities."

"What does it mean?"

Dempsey looked surprised. "Well, it means, you know, having it off. Screwing."

Persse blushed. "The metre's all wrong," he said. "Limerick' is a dactyl."

"Oh? What's 'dip his wick', then?"

"I'd say it was a catalectic trochee."

"Would you, indeed? Interested in prosody, are you?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"I bet you write poetry yourself, don't you?"

"Well, yes, I do."

"I thought so. You have that look about you. There's no money in it, you know."

"So I've discovered," said Persse. "Did you marry the girl, then?"

"What?"

"The postgraduate student. Did you marry her?"

"Oh. No. No, she went her way. Like they all do, eventually." Dempsey swilled the dregs of his sherry at the bottom of his glass.

"And your wife won't have you back?"

"Can't, can she? She's got another bloke now."

"I'm very sorry," said Persse.

"Oh, I don't let it get me down," said Dempsey unconvincingly. "I don't regret the move. It's a good place, Darlington. They've just bought a new computer especially for me."

"And you're a professor, now," said Persse respectfully.

"Yes, I'm a professor now," Dempsey agreed. His face darkened as he added, "So is Swallow, of course."

"Which one is Professor Swallow?" Persse enquired, looking round the room.

"He's here somewhere." Dempsey rather unwillingly scanned the sherry drinkers in search of Philip Swallow.

At that moment the knots of chatting conferees seemed to loosen and part, as if by some magical impulse, opening up an avenue between Persse and the doorway. There, hesitating on the threshold, was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life. She was tall and graceful, with a full, womanly figure, and a dark, creamy complexion. Black hair fell in shining waves to her shoulders, and black was the colour of her simple woollen dress, scooped out low across her bosom. She took a few paces forward into the room and accepted a glass of sherry from the tray offered to her by a passing waitress. She did not drink at once, but held the glass up to her face as if it were a flower. Her right hand held the stem of the glass between index finger and thumb. Her left, passed horizontally across her waist, supported her right elbow. Over the rim of the glass she looked with eyes dark as peat pools straight into Persse's own, and seemed to smile faintly in greeting. She raised the glass to her lips, which were red and moist, the underlip slightly swollen in appearance, as though it had been stung. She drank, and he saw the muscles in her throat move and slide under the skin as she swallowed. "Heavenly God!" Persse breathed, quoting again, this time from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Then, to his extreme annoyance, a tall, slim, distinguished-looking man of middle age, with a rather dashing silver-grey beard, and a good deal of wavy hair of the same hue around the back and sides of his head, but not much on top, darted forward to greet the girl, blocking Persse's view of her.

"There's Swallow," said Dempsey.

"What?" said Persse, coming slowly out of his trance.

"Swallow is the man chatting up that rather dishy girl who just came in, the one in the black dress, or should I say half out of it? Swallow seems to be getting an eyeful, doesn't he?"

Persse flushed and stiffened with a chivalrous urge to protect the girl from insult. Professor Swallow, leaning forward to scrutinize her lapel badge, did indeed seem to be peering rudely down her décolletage.

"Fine pair of knockers there, wouldn't you say?" Dempsey remarked.

Persse turned on him fiercely. "Knockers? *Knockers*? Why in the name of God call them that?"

Dempsey backed away slightly. "Steady on. What would you call them, then?"

"I would call them ... I would call them . . . twin domes of her body's temple," said Persse.

"Christ, you really are a poet, aren't you? Look, excuse me, I think I'll grab another sherry while there's still time." And Dempsey shouldered his way to the nearest waitress, leaving Persse alone.

But not alone! Miraculously, the girl had materialized at his elbow.

"Hallo, what's your name?" she said, peering at his lapel. "I can't read these little badges without my glasses." Her voice was strong but melodious, slightly American in accent, but with a trace of something else he could not identify.

"Persse McGarrigle - from Limerick," he eagerly replied.

"Perce? Is that short for Percival?"

"It could be," said Persse, "if you like."

The girl laughed, revealing teeth that were perfectly even and perfectly white. "What do you mean, if I like?"

"It's a variant of 'Pearce'." He spelled it out for her.

"Oh, like in *Finnegans Wake*! The Ballad of Persse O'Reilly."

"Exactly so. Persse, Pearce, Pierce- I wouldn't be surprised if they were not all related to Percival. Percival, per se, as Joyce might have said," he added, and was rewarded with another dazzling smile.

"What about McGarrigle?"

"It's an old Irish name that means 'Son of Super-valor'."

"That must take a lot of living up to."

"I do my best," said Persse. "And your own name. . . ?" He inclined his head towards the magnificent bosom, appreciating, now, why Professor Swallow had appeared to be almost nuzzling it in his attempt to read the badge pinned there, for the name was not boldly printed, like everyone else's, but written in a minute italic script. "*A. L. Pabst*" it austere stated. There was no indication of which university she belonged to.

"Angelica," she volunteered.

"Angelica!" Persse exhaled rather than pronounced the syllables. "That's a beautiful name!"

"Pabst is a bit of a let-down, though, isn't it? Not in the same class as 'Son of Super-valour'."

"Would it be a German name?"

"I suppose it was originally, though Daddy is Dutch."

"You don't look German or Dutch."

"No?" she smiled. "What do I look then?" "You look Irish. You remind me of the women in the south-west of Ireland whose ancestors intermarried with the sailors of the Spanish Armada that was shipwrecked on the coast of Munster in the great storm of 1588. They have just your kind of looks."

"What a romantic idea! It could be true, too. I have no idea where I came from originally."

"How's that?"

"I'm an adopted child."

"What does the 'L' stand for?"

"A rather silly name. I'd rather not tell you."

"Then why draw attention to it?"

"If you use initials in the academic world, people think you're a man and take you more seriously."

"No one could mistake you for a man, Angelica," Persse said sincerely.

"I mean in correspondence. Or publications."

"Have you published much?"

"No, not a lot. Well, nothing, yet, actually. I'm still working on my PhD. Did you say you teach at Limerick? Is it a big Department?"

"Not very big," said Persse. "As a matter of fact, there's only the three of us. It's basically an agricultural college. We've only recently started offering a general arts degree. Do you mean to say that you don't know who your real parents were?"

"No idea at all. I was a foundling."

"And where were you found, if that isn't an impertinent question?"

"It is a little intimate, considering we've only just met," said Angelica. "But never mind. I was found in the toilet of a KLM Stratocruiser flying from New York to Amsterdam. I was six weeks old. Nobody knows how I got there."

"Did Mr Pabst find you?"

"No, Daddy was an executive of KLM at the time. He and Mummy adopted me, as they had no children of their own. Have you really only three members of staff in your Department?"

"Yes. There's Professor McCreedy – he's Old English. And Dr Quinlan – Middle English. I'm Modern English."

"What? All of it? From Shakespeare to . . . ?"

"T. S. Eliot. I did my MA thesis on Shakespeare's influence on T. S. Eliot."

"You must be worked to death."

"Well, we don't have a great number of students, to tell you the truth. Not many people know we exist. Professor McCreedy believes in keeping a low profile . . . And yourself, Angelica, where do you teach?"

"I haven't got a proper job at the moment." Angelica frowned, and began to look about her a trifle distractedly, as if in search of employment, so that Persse missed the crucial word in her next sentence. "I did some part-time teaching at . . ." she said. "But now I'm trying to finish my doctoral dissertation."

"What is it on?" Persse asked.

Angelica turned her peat-dark eyes upon him. "Romance," she said.

At that moment a gong sounded to announce dinner, and there was a general surge towards the exit in the course of which Persse got separated from Angelica. To his chagrin, he found himself obliged to sit between two medievalists, one from Oxford and one from Aberystwyth, who, leaning back at dangerous angles on their chairs, conducted an animated discussion about Chaucerian metrics behind his back, while he bent forward over his roast shoe-leather and cast longing looks up to the other end of the table, where Philip Swallow and Robin Dempsey were vying to entertain Angelica Pabst. "If you are looking for the gravy, young man, it's right under your nose."

This observation came from an elderly lady sitting opposite Persse. Though her tone was sharp, her face was friendly, and she allowed herself a smile of complicity when Persse expressed his opinion that the beef was beyond the help of gravy. She wore a black silk dress of antique design and her white hair was neatly retained in a snood decorated with tiny beads of jet. Her name badge identified her as Miss Sybil Maiden, of Girton College, Cambridge. "Retired many years ago," she explained. "But I still attend these conferences whenever I can. It helps to keep me young."

Persse enquired about her scholarly interests.

"I suppose you would call me a folklorist," she said. "I was a pupil of Jessie Weston's. What is your own line of research?"

"I did my Master's thesis on Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot."

"Then you are no doubt familiar with Miss Weston's book, *From Ritual to Romance*, on which Mr Eliot drew for much of the imagery and allusion in *The Waste Land*?"

"Indeed I am," said Persse.

"She argued," Miss Maiden continued, not at all deterred by this answer, "that the quest for the Holy Grail, associated with the Arthurian knights, was only superficially a Christian legend, and that its true meaning was to be sought in pagan fertility ritual. If Mr Eliot had taken her discoveries to heart, we might have been spared the maudlin religiosity of his later poetry."

"Weil," said Persse placatingly, "I suppose everyone is looking for his own Grail. For Eliot it was religious faith, but for another it might be fame, or the love of a good woman."

"Would you mind passing the gravy?" said the Oxford medievalist. Persse obliged.

"It all comes down to sex, in the end," Miss Maiden declared firmly. "The life force endlessly renewing itself." She fixed the gravy boat in the Oxford medievalist's hand with a beady eye. "The Grail cup, for instance, is a female symbol of great antiquity and universal occurrence." (The Oxford medievalist seemed to have second thoughts about helping himself to gravy.) "And the Grail spear, supposed to be the one that pierced the side of Christ, is obviously phallic. The Waste Land is really all about Eliot's fears of impotence and sterility."

"I've heard that theory before," said Persse, "but I feel it's too simple."

"I quite agree," said the Oxford medievalist. "This business of phallic symbolism is a lot of rot." He stabbed the air with his knife to emphasize the point.

Preoccupied with this discussion, Persse failed to observe when Angelica left the dining-room. He looked for her in the bar, but she was not to be found there, or anywhere else that evening. Persse went to bed early, and tossed restlessly on his narrow, lumpy mattress, listening to the plumbing whining in the walls, footfalls in the corridor outside his room, and the sounds of doors slamming and engines starting in the car park beneath his window. Once he thought he heard the voice of Angelica calling "Goodnight," but by the time he got to the window there was nothing to be seen except the fading embers of a departing car's rear lights. Before he got back into bed he switched on the lamp above his sink, and stared critically at his reflection in the mirror. He saw a white, round, freckled face, snub nose, pale blue eyes, and a mop of red curly hair. "I wouldn't say you were handsome, exactly," he murmured. "But I've seen uglier mugs."

Angelica was not present at the first formal session of the conference the next morning, which was one reason why Persse muttered "April is the cruellest month" under his breath as he sat in the lecture-room. Other reasons included the continuing cold, damp weather, which had not been anticipated by the Rumridge hearing engineers, the inedibility of the bacon and tomatoes served at breakfast that morning, and the tedium of the paper to which he was listening. It was being given by the Oxford medievalist and was on the subject of Chaucerian metrics. He had heard the substance of it already, last night at dinner, and it did not improve on reacquaintance.

Persse yawned and shifted his weight from one buttock to another in his seat at the back of the lecture-room. He could not see the faces of many of his colleagues, but as far as could be judged from their postures, most of them were as disengaged from the discourse as himself. Some were leaning back as far as their seats allowed, staring vacantly at the ceiling, others were slumped forwards onto the desks that separated each row, resting their chins on folded arms, and others again were sprawled sideways over two or three seats, with their legs crossed and arms dangling limply to the floor. In the third row a man was surreptitiously doing *The Times* crossword, and at least three people appeared to be asleep. Someone, a student presumably, had carved into the surface of the desk at which Persse sat, cutting deep into the wood with the force of a man driven to the limits of endurance, the word "BORING". Another had scratched the message, "*Swallow is a wanker*." Persse saw no reason to dissent from either of these judgments.

Suddenly, though, there were signs of animation in the audience. The speaker was commencing his peroration, and had made reference to something called "structuralism".

"Of course, to our friends across the Channel," he said, with a slight curl of his lip, "everything I have been saying will seem vanity and illusion. To the structuralists, metre, like language itself, is merely a system of differences. The idea that there might be anything inherently expressive or mimetic in patterns of stress would be anathema . . ."

Some, probably the majority, of the audience, smiled and nodded and nudged each other. Others frowned, bit their lips and began making rapid notes. The question session, chaired by the Aberystwyth medievalist, was lively.

There followed a break for coffee, which was served in a small common-room not far away. Persse was delighted to find Angelica already ensconced here, fetchingly dressed in a roll-neck jumper, tweed skirt and high leather boots. Her cheeks had a healthy glow. She had been for a walk. "I slept through breakfast," she explained, "and I was too late for the lecture."

"You didn't miss much," said Persse. "Both were indigestible. What happened to you last night? I looked all over for you."

"Oh, Professor Swallow asked some people back to his house for a drink."

"You're a friend of his, then, are you?"

"No. Well, not really. I've never met him before, if that's what you mean. But he is very friendly."

"Hmmp," said Persse.

"What was the paper about, this morning?" Angelica asked.

"It was supposed to be about Chaucer's metre, but the discussion was mostly about structuralism."

Angelica looked annoyed. "Oh, what a nuisance that I missed it. I'm very interested in structuralism."

"What is it, exactly?"

Angelica laughed.

"No, I'm serious," said Persse. "What is structuralism? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?"

Angelica looked puzzled, and wary of having her leg pulled. "But you must know something about it, Persse. You must have heard of it, even in ... Where did you do your graduate work?"

"University College Dublin. But I wasn't there much of the time. I had TB, you see. They were very decent about it, let me work on my dissertation in the sanatorium. I had a visit from my supervisor occasionally, but mostly I worked on my own. Then before that, I did my BA at Galway. We never heard anything about structuralism there. Then after I got my Master's degree, I went home to work on the farm for two years. My people are fanners, in county Mayo."

"Did you mean to be a farmer yourself?"

"No, it was to get my strength back, after the TB. The doctors said an open-air life was the thing."

"And did you-get your strength back?"

"Oh yes, I'm sound as a bell, now." He struck himself vigorously on the chest. "Then I got the job at Limerick." "You were lucky. Jobs are hard to find these days."

"I was lucky," Persse agreed. "Indeed I was. I found out afterwards that I was called to the interview by mistake. They really meant to interview another fellow called McGarrigle-some highflying prize scholar from Trinity. But the letter was addressed to me-someone slipped up in the Registry-and they were too embarrassed to retract the invitation."

"Well, you made the most of the lucky break," said Angelica. "They could have appointed one of the other candidates."

"Well, that was another piece of luck," said Persse. "There were no other candidates-not called for interview anyway. They were quite sure they wanted to appoint this McGarrigle fellow, and they were after saving train fares. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I've never been in what you might call the swim, intellectually speaking. That's why I've come to this conference. To improve myself. To find out what's going on in the great world of ideas. Who's in, who's out, and all that. So tell me about structuralism."

Angelica took a deep breath, then expelled it abruptly. "It's hard to know where to start," she said. A bell sounded to summon them back to the lecture room. "Saved by the bell!" she laughed. "Later, then," Persse urged. "I'll see what I can do," said Angelica.

As the conferees shuffled back towards the lecture-room for the second paper of the morning, they cast wistful glances over their shoulders at the figure of the Oxford medievalist shaking hands with Philip Swallow. He had his overcoat on and his briefcase in his hand. "That's the trouble with these conferences," Persse heard someone say, "the chief speakers tend to bugger off as soon as they've done their party piece. Makes you feel like a besieged army when the general flies out in a helicopter."

"Are you coming, Persse?" Angelica enquired. Persse looked at his programme. "'Animal Imagery in Dryden's Heroic Tragedies'," he read aloud.

"It could be interesting," Angelica said earnestly.

"I think I'll sit this one out," said Persse. "I think I'll write a poem instead."

"Oh, do you write poetry? What kind?"

"Short poems," said Persse. "Very short poems."

"Like *haikus*?"

"Shorter than that, sometimes."

"Goodness! What are you going to write about?"

"You can read it when it's finished."

"All right. I'll look forward to that. I'd better go." A vaguely smiling Philip Swallow hovered nearby, like a sheepdog rounding up strays.

"I'll see you in the bar before lunch, then," said Persse. He made a show of hurrying to the Gents, intending to loiter there until the lecture on Dryden had begun. To his consternation, however, Philip Swallow, accompanied by Bob Busby, followed him. Persse locked himself in a closet and sat down on the toilet seat. The two men seemed to be talking about a missing speaker as they stood at the urinal. "When did he phone?" Philip Swallow was saying, and Busby replied, "About two hours ago. He said he would do his best to get here by this afternoon. I told him to spare no expense." "Did you?" said Swallow. "I'm not sure that was entirely wise, Bob."

Persse heard the spurt of tapwater at the sinks, the rattle of the towel dispenser, and the banging of the door as the two men left. After a minute or two, he emerged from hiding and quietly approached the lecture-room. He peered through the little observation window in the door. He could see Angelica in profile, sitting alone in the front row, gracefully alert, a stainless steel ballpen poised in one hand, ready to take notes. She was wearing spectacles with heavy black frames, which made her look formidably efficient, like a high-powered secretary. The rest of the audience was performing the same tableau of petrified boredom as before. Persse tiptoed away, and out into the open air. He crossed the campus and took the road that led to the site of the halls of residence.

The melting snow dripped from the trees, and ran down the back of his neck as he walked, but he was oblivious to the discomfort. He was trying to compose a poem about Angelica Pabst. Unfortunately some lines of W. B. Yeats kept interposing themselves between him and his muse, and the best he could do was to adapt them to his own case.

*How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Chaucer or on Dryden
Or structuralist poetics?*

As he recited the words to himself, it occurred to Persse McGarrigle that perhaps he was in love. "I am in love," he said aloud, to the dripping trees, to a white-bonneted pillar-box, to a sodden mongrel lifting its hind leg against the gatepost of the halls of residence site. "I am in love!" he exclaimed, to a long line of depressed-looking sparrows perched on the railings that ran alongside the slushy drive. "I AM IN LOVE!" he cried, startling a gaggle of geese beside the artificial lake, as he ran up and down, round and round, in the virgin snow, leaving a trail of deep footprints behind him.

Panting from this exercise, he came up to the entrance of Lucas Hall, the tall tower block in which sleeping accommodation had been provided for the conferees. (Martineau Hall, in which they ate and drank, was in contrast, a low cylindrical building, confirming Miss Maiden's views on the universality of sexual symbolism.) A taxi was drawn up outside Lucas Hall, its engine churning, and a thickset man with a fat cigar in his mouth, and a deerstalker, with the flaps down, on his head, was getting out. Seeing Persse, he called "Hi" and beckoned. "Say, is this where the conference is being held?" he asked, in an American accent. "The University Teachers of English Conference? It's the right name, but it doesn't look right."

"This is where we're sleeping," said Persse. "The meetings are held on the main campus, up the road."

"Ah, that figures," said the man. "OK, driver, we made it. How much?"

"Forty-six pounds eighty, guv'nor," the man appeared to say, looking at his meter.

"OK, there you go," said the newcomer, stripping ten crisp new five-pound notes from a thick wad, and pushing them through the cab window. The driver, catching sight of Persse, leaned out and addressed him. "You don't wanner cab to London by any chance?"

"No thank you," said Persse.

"I'll be on my way, then. Thanks guv'nor."

Awed by this display of wealth, Persse picked up the new arrival's suitcase, a handsome leather affair with the vestiges of many labels on it, and carried it into the lobby of Lucas Hall. "Have you really and truly come all the way from London by taxi?" he said.

"I had no choice. When I landed at Heathrow this morning they tell me that my connecting flight is cancelled, Rummidge airport is socked in by snow. They give me a railroad ticket instead. So I take a cab to the railroad station in London and they tell me the power lines for the trains to Rummidge are down. Great drama, the country paralysed, Rummidge cut off from the capital, everybody enjoying every minute of it, the porters can hardly contain their joy. When I said I'd take a cab all the way, they said I was crazy, tried to talk me out of it. '*You'll never get through,*' they said, '*the motorways are covered in snowdrifts, there are people who have been trapped in their cars all night.*' So I go along the cab rank till I find a driver with the guts to give it a whirl, and what do we find when we get here? Two inches of melting snow. What a country!" He took off his deerstalker and held it at arm's length. It was made from a hairy tweed, with a bold red check on a yellowy-brown background. "I bought this hat at Heathrow this morning," he said. "The first thing I always seem to have to do when I arrive in England is buy myself a hat."

"It's a fine hat," said Persse.

"You like it? Remind me to give it to you when I leave. I'm travelling on to warmer climes." "That's very kind of you."

"You're welcome. Now, where do I check in?" "There's a list of rooms over here," said Persse. "What's your name?"

"Morris Zapp."

"I'm sure I've heard that name before." "I should hope so. What's yours?"

"Persse McGarrigle, from Limerick. Aren't you giving a paper this afternoon?" he said. "Title to be announced?"

"Right, Percy. That's why I strained every nerve to get here. Look at the bottom of the list. There are never many zees."

Persse looked. "It says here that you're a non-resident." "Ah, yeah, Philip Swallow said something about staying with him. How's it going, the Conference?"

"I can't really say. I've never been to a conference before, so I've no standards of comparison."

"Is that right?" Morris Zapp regarded him with curiosity. "A conference virgin, huh? Where is everybody, by the way?"

"They're at a lecture."

"Which you cut? Well, you've learned the first rule of conferences, kid. Never go to lectures. Unless you're giving one yourself, of course. Or *I'm* giving one," he added reflectively. "I wouldn't want to discourage you from hearing my paper this afternoon. I went over it last night in the plane, while the movie was showing, and I was pretty pleased with it. The movie was OK, too. What size of audience am I likely to get?"

"Well, there are fifty-seven people at the conference, altogether," Persse said.

Professor Zapp nearly swallowed his cigar. "*Fifty-seven?* You must be joking. No? You're not joking? You mean I've travelled six thousand miles to talk to fifty-seven people?"

"Of course, not everybody goes to every lecture," said Persse. "As you can see."

"Listen, do you know how many attend the American equivalent of this conference? *Ten thousand.* There were ten thousand people at the MLA in New York last December."

"I don't think we have that many lecturers over here," said Persse apologetically.

"There must be more than fifty-seven," growled Morris Zapp. "Where are they? I'll tell you where. Most of them are holed up at home, decorating their living-rooms or weeding their gardens, and the few with two original ideas to rub together are off somewhere at conferences in warmer, more attractive places than this." He looked around the lobby of Lucas Hall, at its cracked and dusty floor tiles, its walls of grimy untreated concrete, with disfavour. "Is there anywhere you can get a drink in this place?"

"The bar will be opening soon in Martineau Hall," said Persse.

"Lead me to it."

"Have you really flown all the way from America for this conference, Professor Zapp?" Persse enquired, as they picked their way through the slush.

"Not exactly. I was coming to Europe anyway—I'm on sabbatical this quarter. Philip Swallow heard I was coming over and asked me to take in his conference. So, to oblige an old friend, I said I would."

The bar in Martineau Hall was empty except for the barman, who watched their approach through a kind of chrome-plated portcullis that stretched from counter to ceiling.

"Is this to keep you in, or us out?" quipped Morris Zapp, tapping the metal. "What's yours, Percy? Guinness? A pint of Guinness, barman, and a large scotch on the rocks."

"We're not open yet," said the man. "Not till twelve-thirty."

"And have something yourself."

"Yes, sir, thank you sir," said the barman, cranking the portcullis with alacrity. "I wouldn't say no to a pint of bitter."

While he was drawing the draught Guinness, the other conferees, released from the second lecture of the morning, began to straggle in, Philip Swallow in the van. He strode up to Morris Zapp and wrung his hand.

"Morris! It's marvellous to see you after—how many years?" "Ten, Philip, ten years, though I hate to admit it. But you're looking good. The beard is terrific. Was your hair always that colour?"

Philip Swallow blushed. "I think it was starting to go grey in '69. How did you get here in the end?" "That'll be one pound fifty, sir," said the barman. "By taxi," said Morris Zapp. "Which reminds me: you owe me fifty pounds for the cab fare. Hey, what's the matter, Philip? You've gone white."

"And the Conference has just gone into the red," said Rupert Sutcliffe, with doleful satisfaction. "Hello, Zapp, I don't suppose you remember me."

"Rupert! How could I ever forget that happy face? And here comes Bob Busby, right on cue," said Morris Zapp, as a man with a less impressive beard than Philip Swallow's cantered into the bar, a clipboard under his arm, keys and coins jingling in his pockets. Philip Swallow took him aside and urgent whispers were exchanged.

"I'm afraid you're landed with me as your chairman this afternoon, Zapp," said Rupert Sutcliffe. "I'm honoured, Rupert." "Have you, er, decided on a title?" "Yep. It's called, 'Textuality as Striptease'." "Oh," said Rupert Sutcliffe.

"Does everybody know this young man, who kindly looked after me when I arrived?" said Morris Zapp. "Percy McGarrigle from Limerick."

Philip Swallow nodded perfunctorily at Persse and turned his attention back to the American. "Morris, we must get you a lapel badge so that everybody will know who you are." "Don't worry, if they don't know already, I'll tell them." "When I said 'Take a cab,'" said Bob Busby reproachfully to Morris Zapp, "I meant from Heathrow to Euston, not from London to Rummidge."

"Never mind that now," said Philip Swallow impatiently. "It's no use crying over spilt milk. Morris, where is your luggage? I thought you'd be more comfortable staying with us than in Hall." "I think so too, now I've seen the hall," said Morris Zapp. "Hilary is dying to see you," said Swallow, leading him away. "Hmm. That should be an interesting reunion," murmured Rupert Sutcliffe, peering at the departing pair over his glasses. "What?" Persse responded absently. He was looking out for

Angelica.

"Well, you see, about ten years ago those two were nominated for our exchange scheme with Euphoria—in America, you know. Zapp came here for six months, and Swallow went to Euphoric State. Rumour has it that Zapp had an affair with Hilary Swallow, and Swallow with Mrs Zapp."

"You don't say so?" Persse was intrigued by this story, in spite of the distraction of seeing Angelica come into the bar with Robin Dempsey. He was talking to her with great animation, while she wore the slightly fixed smile of someone who is being sung at in a musical comedy.

"Quite. 'What a set,' as Matthew Arnold said of the Shelley circle . . . Anyway, at the same time, Gordon Masters, our Head of Department, retired prematurely after a nervous breakdown—it was 1969, the year of the student revolution, a trying time for everybody – and Zapp was being mooted by some as his successor. One day, however, just when things were coming to a head, he and Hilary Swallow suddenly flew off to America together, and we really didn't know which couple to expect back: Zapp and Hilary, Philip and Hilary, Philip and Mrs Zapp, or both Zapps."

"What was Mrs Zapp's name?" said Persse.

"I've forgotten," said Rupert Sutcliffe. "Does it matter?"

"I like to know names," said Persse. "I can't follow a story without them."

"Anyway, we never saw her. The Swallows returned together. We gathered they were going to give the marriage another chance."

"It seems to have worked."

"Mmm. Though in my opinion," Sutcliffe said darkly, "the whole episode had a deplorable effect on Swallow's character."

"Oh?"

Sutcliffe nodded, but seemed disinclined to elaborate.

"So then they gave Philip Swallow the chair?" said Persse.

"Not *then*, oh goodness me, no. No, then we had Dalton, he came from Oxford, until three years ago. He was killed in a car accident. Then they appointed Swallow. Some people would have preferred me, I believe, but I'm getting too old for that sort of thing."

"Oh, surely not," said Persse, because Rupert Sutcliffe seemed to hope he would.

"I'll say one thing," Sutcliffe volunteered. "If they'd appointed me, they'd have had a Head of Department who stuck to his last, and wasn't flying off here there and everywhere all the time."

"Travels a lot, does he – Professor Swallow?"

Persse excused himself and pushed his way through the crowd at the bar to where Angelica was waiting for Dempsey to bring her a drink. "Hallo, how was the lecture?" he greeted her.

"Boring. But there was an interesting discussion of structuralism afterwards."

"Again? You've really got to tell me what structuralism is all about. It's a matter of urgency."

"Structuralism?" said Dempsey, coming up with a sherry for Angelica just in time to hear Persse's plea, and all too eager to show off his expertise. "It all goes back to Saussure's linguistics. The arbitrariness of the signifier. Language as a system of differences with no positive terms."

"Give me an example," said Persse. "I can't follow an argument without an example."

"Well, take the words dog and cat. There's no absolute reason why the combined phonemes d-o-g should signify a quadruped that goes '*woof woof*' rather than one that goes '*miaou*'. It's a purely arbitrary relationship, and there's no reason why English speakers shouldn't decide that from tomorrow, d-o-g would signify 'cat' and c-a-t, 'dog'."

"Wouldn't it confuse the animals?" said Persse.

"The animals would adjust in time, like everyone else," said Dempsey. "We know this because the same animal is signified by different acoustic images in different natural languages. For instance, 'dog' is *chien* in French, *Hund* in German, *cane* in Italian, and so on. 'Cat' is *chat*, *Katze*, *gatto*, according to what part of the Common Market you happen

to be in. And if we are to believe language rather than our ears, English dogs go 'woof woof', French dogs go 'wouah_wouah' German dogs go 'wau wau' and Italian ones 'baau baau'

"Hallo, this sounds like a game of Animal Snap. Can anyone play?" said Philip Swallow. He had returned to the bar with Morris Zapp, now provided with a lapel badge. "Dempsey – you remember Morris of course?"

"I was just explaining structuralism to this young man," said Dempsey, when greetings had been exchanged. "But you never did have much time for linguistics, did you Swallow?"

"Can't say I did, no. I never could remember which came first, the morphemes or the phonemes. And one look at a tree-diagram makes my mind go blank."

"Or blanker," said Dempsey with a sneer.

An embarrassed silence ensued. It was broken by Angelica. "Actually," she said meekly, "Jakobson cites the gradation of positive, comparative and superlative forms of the adjective as evidence that language is not a totally arbitrary system. For instance: blanks blanker, blankest. The more phonemes, the more emphasis. The same is true of other Indo-European languages, for instance Latin: *vacuus*, *vacuior*, *vacuissimus*. There does seem to be some iconic correlation between sound and sense across the boundaries of natural languages."

The four men gaped at her. "Who is this prodigy?" said Morris Zapp. "Won't somebody introduce me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Philip Swallow. "Miss Pabst – Professor Zapp."

"Morris, please," said the American professor, extending his hand, and peering at Angelica's lapel badge. "Glad to meet you Al."

"That was marvellous," said Persse to Angelica, later, at lunch. "The way you put that Dempsey fellow in his place."

"I hope I wasn't rude," said Angelica. "Basically he's right of course. Different languages divide up the world differently. For instance, this mutton we're eating. In French there's only one word for 'sheep' and 'mutton' —mouton. So you can't say 'dead as mutton' in French, you'd be saying 'dead as a sheep', which would be absurd."

"I don't know, this tastes more like dead sheep than mutton to me," said Persse, pushing his plate aside. An overalled lady with bright yellow curls pushing a trolley piled high with plates of half-eaten food took it from the table. "Finished, love?" she said. "I don't blame you. Not very nice, is it?"

"Did you write your poem?" said Angelica.

"I'll let you read it tonight. You have to come to the top floor of Lucas Hall."

"Is that where your room is?"

"No."

"Why then?"

"You'll see."

"A mystery." Angelica smiled, wrinkling her nose. "I like a mystery."

"Ten o'clock on the top floor. The moon will be up by then." "Are you sure this isn't just an excuse for a romantic tryst?"

"Well, you said your research topic was romance ..." "And you thought you'd give me some more material? Alas, I've got too much already. I've read hundreds of romances. Classical romances and medieval romances, renaissance romances and modern romances. Heliodorus and Apuleius, Chrétien de Troyes and Malory, Ariosto and Spenser, Keats and Barbara Cartland. I don't need any more data. What I need is a theory to explain it all."

"Theory?" Philip Swallow's ears quivered under their silvery thatch, a few places further up the table. "That word brings out the Goering in me. When I hear it I reach for my revolver."

"Then you're not going to like my lecture, Philip," said Morris Zapp.

In the event, not many people did like Morris Zapp's lecture, and several members of the audience walked out before he had finished. Rupert Sutcliffe, obliged as chairman to sit facing the audience, assumed an aspect of glazed impassivity, but by imperceptible degrees the corners of his mouth turned down at more and more acute angles and his spectacles slid further and further down his nose as the discourse proceeded. Morris Zapp delivered it striding up and down the platform with his notes in one hand and a fat cigar in the other. "You see before you," he began, "a man who once believed in the possibility of interpretation. That is, I thought that the goal of reading was to establish the meaning of texts. I used to be a Jane Austen man. I think I can say in all modesty I was the Jane Austen man. I wrote five books on Jane Austen, every one of which was trying to establish what her novels meant—and, naturally, to prove that no one had properly understood what they meant before. Then I began a commentary on the works of Jane Austen, the aim of which was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle -historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, structural, Freudian, Jungian, Marxist, existentialist, Christian, allegorical, ethical, phe-nomenological, archetypal, you name it. So that when each commentary was written, there would be *nothing further to say* about the novel in question.

"Of course, I never finished it. The project was not so much Utopian as self-defeating. By that I don't just mean that if successful it would have eventually put us all out of business. I mean that it couldn't succeed because it isn't possible, and it isn't possible because of the nature of language itself, in which meaning is constantly being transferred from one signifier to another and can never be absolutely possessed.

"To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. *But every decoding is another encoding*. If you say something to me I check that I have understood your message by saying it back to you in my own words, that is, different words from the ones you used, for if I repeat your own words exactly you will doubt whether I have really understood you. But if I use my words it follows that I have changed your meaning, however slightly; and even if I were, deviantly, to indicate my comprehension by repeating back to you your own unaltered words, that is no guarantee that I have duplicated *your* meaning in my head, because I bring a different experience of language, literature, and non-verbal reality to those words, therefore they mean something different to me from what they mean to you. And if you think I have not

understood the meaning of your message, you do not simply repeat it in the same words, you try to explain it in different words, different from the ones you used originally; but then the it is no longer the it that you started with. And for that matter, you are not the you that you started with. Time has moved on since you opened your mouth to speak, the molecules in your body have changed, what you intended to say has been superseded by what you did say, and that has already become part of your personal history, imperfectly remembered. Conversation is like playing tennis with a ball made of Krazy Putty that keeps coming back over the net in a different shape.

"Reading, of course, is different from conversation. It is more passive in the sense that we can't interact with the text, we can't affect the development of the text by our own words, since the text's words are already given. That is what perhaps encourages the quest for interpretation. If the words are fixed once and for all, on the page, may not their meaning be fixed also? Not so, because the same axiom, every decoding is another encoding, applies to literary criticism even more stringently than it does to ordinary spoken discourse. In ordinary spoken discourse, the endless cycle of encoding-decoding-encoding may be terminated by an action, as when for instance I say, 'The door is open,' and you say, 'Do you mean you would like me to shut it?' and I say, 'If you don't mind,' and you shut the door—we may be satisfied that at a certain level my meaning has been understood. But if the literary text says, 'The door was open,' I cannot ask the text what it means by saying that the door was open, I can only speculate about the significance of that door-opened by what agency, leading to what discovery, mystery, goal? The tennis analogy will not do for the activity of reading – it is not a to-and-fro process, but an endless, tantalising leading on, a flirtation without consummation, or if there is consummation, it is solitary, masturbatory. (Here the audience grew restive.) The reader plays with himself as the text plays upon him, plays upon his curiosity, desire, as a striptease dancer plays upon her audience's curiosity and desire.

"Now, as some of you know, I come from a city notorious for its bars and nightclubs featuring topless and bottomless dancers. I am told – I have not personally patronized these places, but I am told on the authority of no less a person than your host at this conference, my old friend Philip Swallow, who has patronized them (here several members of the audience turned in their seats to stare and grin at Philip Swallow, who blushed to the roots of his silver-grey hair) – that the girls take off all their clothes before they commence dancing in front of the customers. This is not striptease, it is all strip and no tease, it is the terpsichorean equivalent of the hermeneutic fallacy of a recuperable meaning, which claims that if we remove the clothing of its rhetoric from a literary text we discover the bare facts it is trying to communicate. The classical tradition of striptease, however, which goes back to Salome's dance of the seven veils and beyond, and which survives in a debased form in the dives of your Soho, offers a valid metaphor for the activity of reading. The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers, with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another. When we have seen the girl's underwear we want to see her body, when we have seen her breasts we want to see her buttocks, and when we have seen her buttocks we want to see her pubis, and when we see her pubis, the dance ends – but is our curiosity and desire satisfied? Of course not. The vagina remains hidden within the girl's body, shaded by her pubic hair, and even if she were to spread her legs before us [at this point several ladies in the audience noisily departed] it would still not satisfy the curiosity and desire set in motion by the stripping. Staring into that orifice we find that we have somehow overshot the goal of our quest, gone beyond pleasure in contemplated beauty; gazing into the womb we are returned to the mystery of our own origins. Just so in reading. The attempt to peer into the very core of a text, to possess once and for all its meaning, is vain—it is only ourselves that we find there, not the work itself. Freud said that obsessive reading (and I suppose that most of us in this room must be regarded as compulsive readers) – that obsessive reading is the displaced expression of a desire to see the mother's genitals [here a young man in the audience fainted and was carried out] but the point of the remark, which may not have been entirely appreciated by Freud himself, lies precisely in the concept of displacement. To read is to surrender oneself to an endless displacement of curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it we should take pleasure in its teasing."

Morris Zapp went on to illustrate his thesis with a number of passages from classic English and American literature. When he sat down, there was scattered and uneven applause.

"The floor is now open for discussion," said Rupert Sutcliffe, surveying the audience apprehensively over the rims of his glasses. "Are there any questions or comments?"

There was a long silence. Then Philip Swallow stood up. "I have listened to your paper with great interest, Morris," he said. "Great interest. Your mind has lost none of its sharpness since we first met. But I am sorry to see that in the intervening years you have succumbed to the virus of structuralism."

"I wouldn't call myself a structuralist," Morris Zapp interrupted. "A post-structuralist, perhaps."

Philip Swallow made a gesture implying impatience with such subtle distinctions. "I refer to that fundamental scepticism about the possibility of achieving certainty about anything, which I associate with the mischievous influence of Continental theorizing. There was a time when leading was a comparatively simple matter, something you learned to do in primary school. Now it seems to be some kind of arcane mystery, into which only a small élite have been initiated. X have been reading books for their meaning all my life—or at least that is what I have always thought I was doing. Apparently I was mistaken."

"You weren't mistaken about what you were trying to do," said Morris Zapp, relighting his cigar, "you were mistaken in trying to do it."

"I have just one question," said Philip Swallow. "It is this: what, with the greatest respect, is the point of our discussing your paper if, according to your own theory, we should not be discussing what you actually said at all, but discussing some imperfect memory or subjective interpretation of what you said?"

"There is no point," said Morris Zapp blithely. "If by point you mean the hope of arriving at some certain truth. But when did you ever discover that in a question-and-discussion session? Be honest, have you ever been to a lecture or seminar at the end of which you could have found two people present who could agree on the simplest précis of what had been said?"

"Then what in God's name is the point of it all?" cried Philip Swallow, throwing his hands into the air. "The point, of course, is to uphold the institution of academic literary studies. We maintain our position in society by publicly performing a certain ritual, just like any other group of workers in the realm of discourse- lawyers, politicians, journalists. And as it looks as if we have done our duty for today, shall we all adjourn for a drink?"

"Tea, I'm afraid it will have to be," said Rupert Sutcliffe, clutching with relief this invitation to bring the proceedings to a speedy close.

"Thank you very much for a most, er, stimulating and, ah, suggestive lecture."

" 'Suggestive and stimulating' —the old fellow hit the nail on the head," said Persse to Angelica as they filed out of the lecture room.

"Does your mother know you're away out listening to that sort of language?"

"I thought it was interesting," said Angelica. "Of course, it all goes back to Peirce."

"Me?"

"Peirce. Another variant spelling of your name. He was an American philosopher. He wrote somewhere about the impossibility of stripping the veils of representation from meaning. And that was before the First World War."

"Was it, indeed? You're a remarkably well-read young woman, Angelica, do you know that? Where were you educated at all?"

"Oh, various places," she said vaguely. "Mainly England and America."

They passed Rupert Sutcliffe and Philip Swallow in the corridor, in urgent consultation with Bob Busby, apparently about theatre tickets. "Are you going to the Repertory Theatre tonight?" said Angelica.

"I didn't put down to go. It didn't say on the form what the play was."

"I believe it's Lear."

"Are you going, then?" Persse asked anxiously. "What about my poem?"

"Your poem? Oh dear, I forgot. Ten o'clock on the top floor, wasn't it? I'll try and get back promptly. Professor Dempsey is taking me in his car, so that will save time."

"Dempsey? You want to be careful of that fellow, you know. He preys on young women like yourself. He told me so." Angelica laughed. "I can take care of myself." They found Morris Zapp drinking tea alone in the common room, the other conferees having left a kind of *cordon sanitaire* around him. Angelica went boldly up to the American.

"Professor Zapp, I did so enjoy your lecture," she said, with a greater degree of enthusiasm than Persse had expected or could, indeed, bring himself to approve.

"Well, thank you, Al," said Morris Zapp. "I certainly enjoyed giving it. I seem to have offended the natives, though."

"I'm working on the subject of romance for my doctorate," said Angelica, "and it seemed to me that a lot of what you were saying applied very well to romance."

"Naturally," said Morris Zapp. "It applies to everything." "I mean, the idea of romance as narrative striptease, the endless leading on of the reader, a repeated postponement of an ultimate revelation which never comes-or, when it does, terminates the pleasure of the text . . ." "Exactly," said Morris Zapp.

"And there's even a good deal of actual striptease in the romances." "There is?" said Morris Zapp. "Yes, I guess there is."

"Ariosto's heroines for instance, are always losing their clothes and being gloated over by the heroes who rescue them."

"It's a long time since I read Ariosto," said Morris Zapp. "And of course, *The Faerie Queene* — the two girls in the fountain in the Bower of Blisse . . ."

"I must look at that again," said Morris Zapp.

"Then there's Madeline undressing under the gaze of Porphyro in 'St Agnes' Eve'." "Right, 'St Agnes' Eve'."

"Geraldine in 'Christabel'."

"— 'Christabel! —"

At this point Philip Swallow came bustling up. "Morris, I hope you didn't mind my having a go at you just now —"

"Of course not. Philip. *Vive le sport*."

"Only nobody else seemed inclined to speak, and I am very concerned about these matters, I really think the subject is in a state of crisis —" He broke off, as Angelica politely backed away. "Oh, I'm sorry, have I interrupted something?"

"It's quite all right, we've finished," said Angelica. "Thank you very much, Professor Zapp, you've been most helpful."

"Any time, Al."

"Actually, you know, my name is Angelica," she smiled. "Well, I thought Al must be short for something," said Morris Zapp. "Let me know if I can give you any more help."

"He didn't give you any help at all," said Persse indignantly, as they helped themselves to tea and biscuits. "You provided the ideas and the examples."

"Well, his lecture provided the stimulus."

"You told me he cribbed it all from the other fellow, my namesake."

"I didn't say he cribbed it, silly. Just that Peirce had the same idea."

"Why didn't you tell Zapp that?"

"You have to treat these professors carefully, Persse," said Angelica, with a sly smile. "You have to flatter them a bit."

"Ah, Angelica!" A bright blue suit interposed itself between them. "I'd like to discuss that very interesting idea of Jakobson's you mentioned this morning," said Robin Dempsey. "We can't allow McGarrigle to monopolize you for the duration of the conference."

"I need to see Dr Busby, anyway," said Persse, retiring with dignity.

He found Bob Busby in the conference office. A young man from London University, whom Persse had overheard making the remark about generals deserting their armies at the coffee break that morning, was waving a theatre ticket under Busby's nose.

"Are you trying to tell me that this ticket isn't for *Lear* after all?" he was saying.

"Well, unfortunately, the Rep has postponed the opening of *King Lear*" said Busby apologetically. "And extended the run of the Christmas pantomime."

"Pantomime? *Pantomime*?"

"It's the only production in the whole year that makes a profit, you can't really blame them," said Busby. "Puss in Boots. I believe it's very good."

"Jesus wept," said the young man. "Is there any chance of getting my money back on the ticket?"

"I'm afraid it's too late now," said Busby.

"I'll buy it," said Persse.

"I say, will you really?" said the young man turning round. "It costs two pounds fifty. You can have it for two quid."

"Thanks," said Persse, handing over the money.

"Don't go telling everybody it's *Puss in Boots*," Busby pleaded. "I'm making out it's a sort of mystery trip."

"It's a mystery to me," said the young man, "why any of us came to this Godforsaken hole in the first place."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that," said Busby. "It's very central."

"Central to what?"

Bob Busby frowned reflectively. "Well, since they opened the M50 I can get to Tintern Abbey, door to door, in ninety-five minutes."

"Go there often, do you?" said the young man. He fingered Persse's pound notes speculatively. "Is there a good fish-and-chip shop near here? I'm starving. Haven't been able to eat a thing since I arrived."

"There's a Chinese takeaway at the second traffic lights on the London Road," said Bob Busby. "I'm sorry that you're not enjoying the food. Still, there's always tomorrow night to look forward to."

"What happens tomorrow night?"

"A medieval banquet!" said Busby, beaming with pride.

"I can hardly wait," said the young man, as he left.

"I thought it would make a rather nice climax to the conference," said Bob Busby to Persse. "We're having an outside firm in to supervise the catering and provide the entertainment. There'll be mead, and minstrels and"-he rubbed his hands together in anticipatory glee—"wenches."

"My word," said Persse. "Life runs very high in Rummidge, surely. By the way, do you have a streetplan of the city? There's an aunty of mine living here, and I ought to call on her. The address is Gittings Road."

"Why, that's not far from here!" Busby exclaimed. "Walking distance. I'll draw you a map."

Following Busby's directions, Persse left the campus, walked through some quiet residential streets lined with large, handsome houses, their snowy drives scored by the tyre tracks of Rovers and Jaguars; crossed a busy thoroughfare, where buses and lorries had churned the snow into furrows of black slush; and penetrated a region of older and less well-groomed property. After a few minutes he became aware of a figure slipping and sliding on the pavement ahead of him, crowned by a familiar deerstalker.

"Hallo, Professor Zapp," he said, drawing level. "Are you taking a stroll?"

"Oh, hi, Percy. No, I'm on my way to visit my old landlord. I spent six months in this place, you know, ten years ago. I even thought of staying here once. I must have been out of my mind. Do you know it well?"

"I've never been here before, but I have an aunty living here. Not a real aunty, but related through cousins. My mother said to be sure to look her up. I'm on my way now."

"A duty call, huh? I take a right here."

Persse consulted his map. "So do I."

"How d'you like Rummidge, then?"

"There are too many street-lights."

"Come again?"

"You can't see the stars properly at night, because of all the streetlights," said Persse.

"Yeah, and there are a few other disadvantages I could tell you about," said Morris Zapp. "Like not a single restaurant you would take your worst enemy to, four different kinds of electric socket in every room, hotel bedrooms that freeze your eyebrows to the pillows, and disc jockeys that deserve to have their windpipes slit. I can't say that the absence of stars bugged me all that much."

"Even the moon seems dimmer than at home," said Persse.

"You're a romantic, Percy, you know that? You ought to write poetry. This is the street: Gittings Road."

"My aunty's street," said Persse.

Morris Zapp stopped in the middle of the pavement. "That's a remarkable coincidence," he said. "What's your aunty's name?"

"Mrs O'Shea, Mrs Nuala O'Shea," said Persse. "Her husband is Dr Brendan O'Shea."

Morris Zapp performed a little jig of excitement. "It's him, it's him!" he cried, in a rough imitation of an Irish brogue. "It's himself, my old landlord! Mother of God, won't he be surprised to see the pair of us."

"Mother of God!" said Dr O'Shea, when he opened the front door of his large and gloomy-looking house. "If it isn't Professor Zapp!"

"And here's your nephew from the Emerald Isle, Percy McGarrigle, come to see his aunty," said Morris Zapp.

Dr O'Shea's face fell. "Ah, yes, your mammy wrote, Persse. But I'm afraid you've missed Mrs O'Shea—she left for Ireland yesterday. But come in, come in. I've nothing to offer you, and surgery starts in twenty minutes, but come in." He ushered them into a chilly parlour, smelling faintly of mildew and mothballs, and switched on an electric fire in the hearth. Simulated coals lighted up, though not the element. "Cheerful, I always think - makes you feel warm just to look at it," said the doctor.

"I've brought you a little duty-free hooch," said Morris Zapp, taking a half-bottle of scotch from his raincoat pocket.

"God love you, it's just like old times," groaned Dr O'Shea. He got down on his knees and groped in a sideboard for glasses. "The whisky flowed like water," he confided in Persse, "when Professor Zapp lived here."

"Don't get the wrong idea, Percy," said Morris Zapp. "It's just Milo's way of saying I usually had a bottle or two of Old Grandad in the cupboard. Here's looking at you, Milo."

"So where's Aunt Nuala?" Persse enquired, when they had sunk the whisky, and O'Shea was refilling their glasses.

"Back in Sligo. Family troubles." Dr O'Shea shook his head gravely. "Her sister is very bad, very bad. All on account of that daughter of hers, Bernadette."

"Bernadette?" Morris Zapp cut in. "You mean that black-haired kid who was living with you when I had the apartment upstairs?"

"The same. Do you know your cousin Bernadette, Persse?"

"I haven't seen her since we were children. But I did hear rumours of a scandal."

"Aye, there was a scandal, all right. After she left us, she went to work in a hotel in Sligo Town, as a chambermaid in a hotel there, and one of the guests took advantage of her. To cut a long story short, she became pregnant and was dismissed."

"Who was the guy?" said Morris Zapp.