

L. R. Fredericks

L. R. Fredericks lives in London. *Farundell* is her first novel.

Praise for *Farundell*

‘A richly ambitious debut novel . . . Fredericks is adroit at changing moods, able to conjure up the horror of a battlefield, the calm of a garden, or the farce of a party . . . One cannot help but be swept away by her bold intentions’ *Financial Times*

‘Beautifully written . . . I am sure it will appeal to many people’
Daily Mail

‘Descriptively, conceptually and emotionally captivating’
Easy Living

Farundell

L. R. FREDERICKS

JOHN MURRAY

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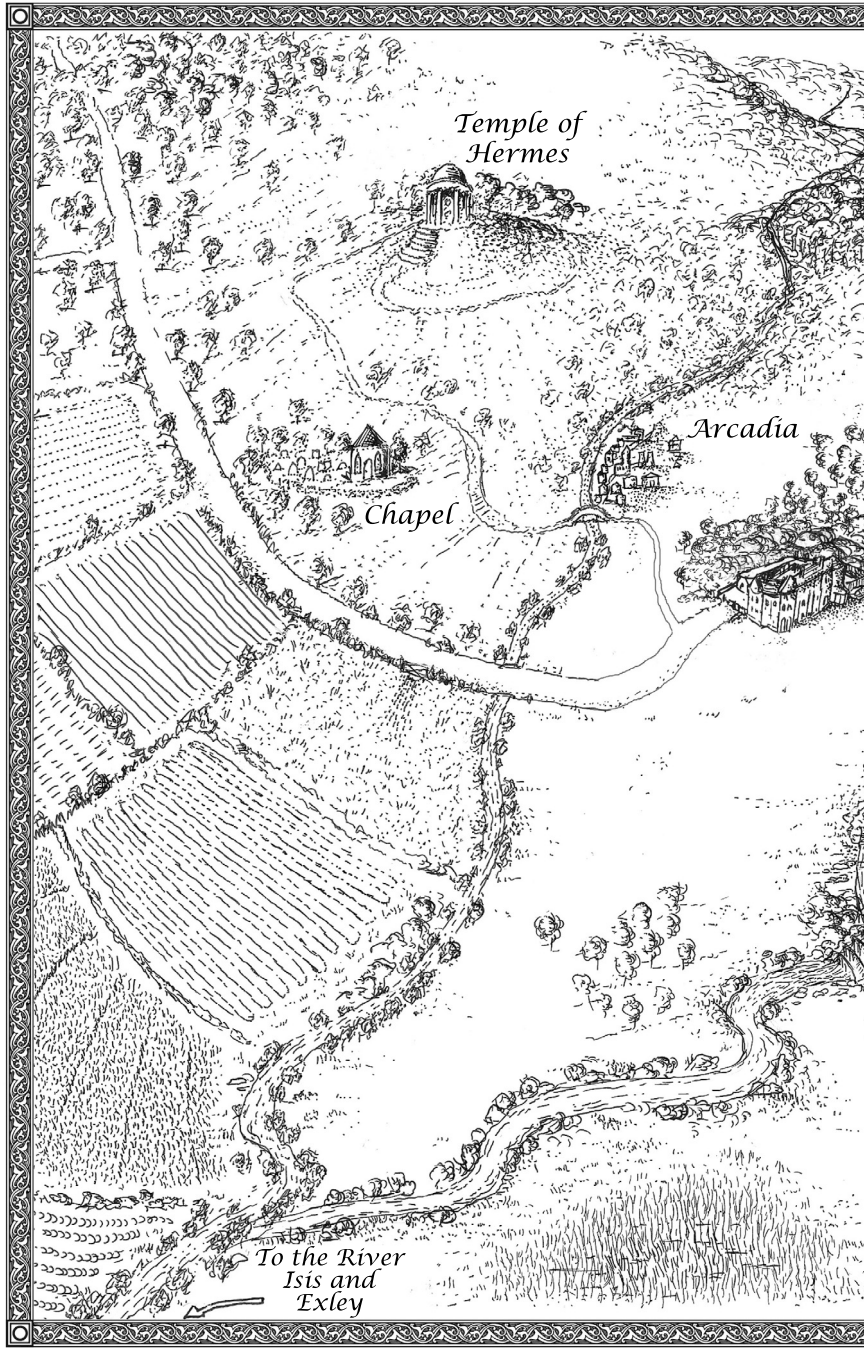
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To Isis Myrionymos
and to Ruth, who Knows

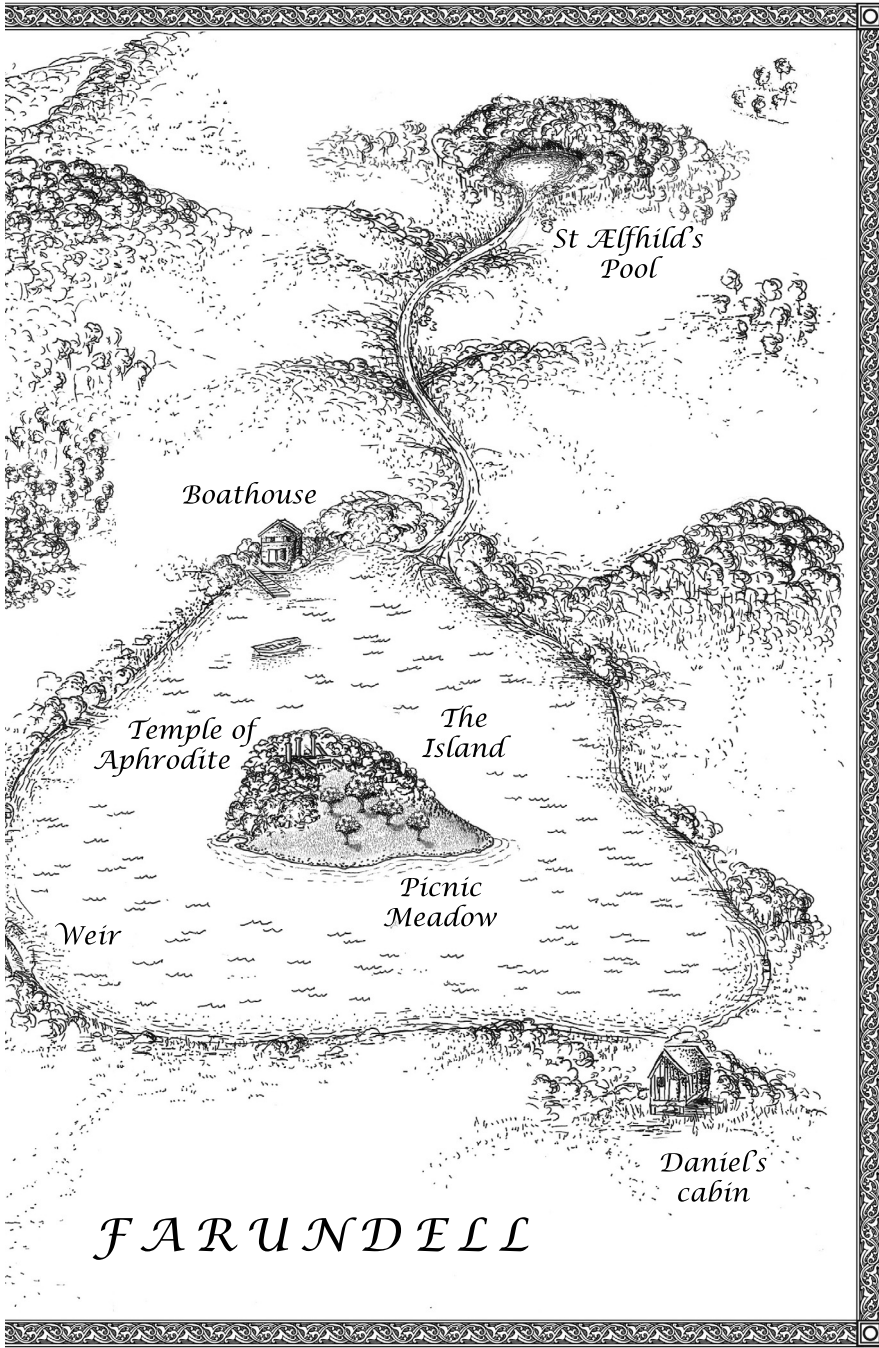


*Temple of
Hermes*

Arcadia

Chapel

*To the River
Isis and
Exley*



St Ælfhild's
Pool

Boathouse

Temple of
Aphrodite

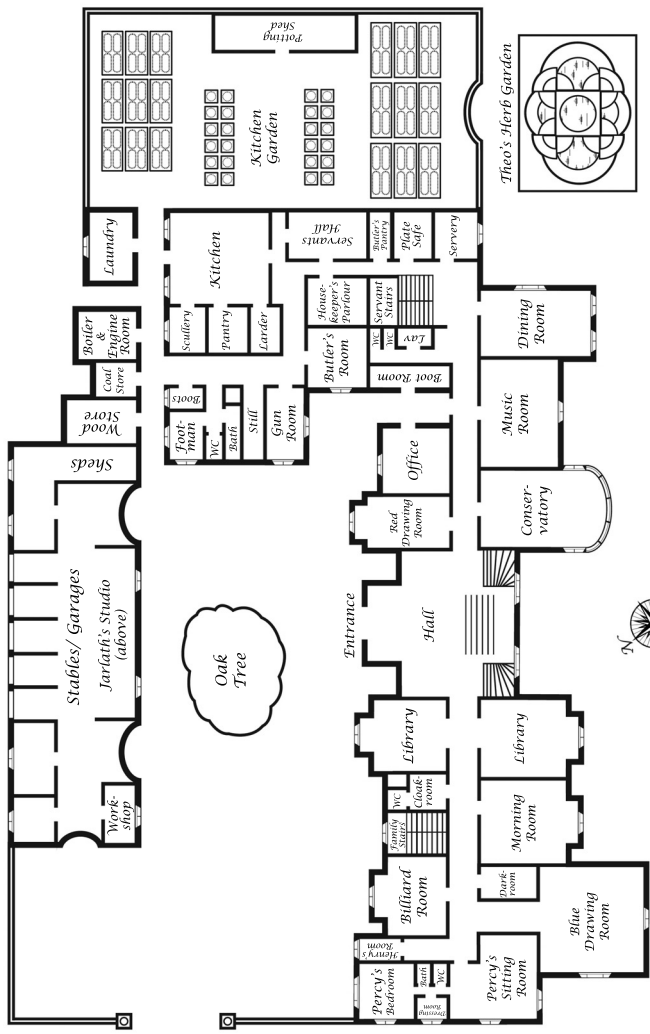
The
Island

Picnic
Meadow

Weir

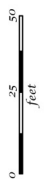
Daniel's
cabin

FARUNDELL



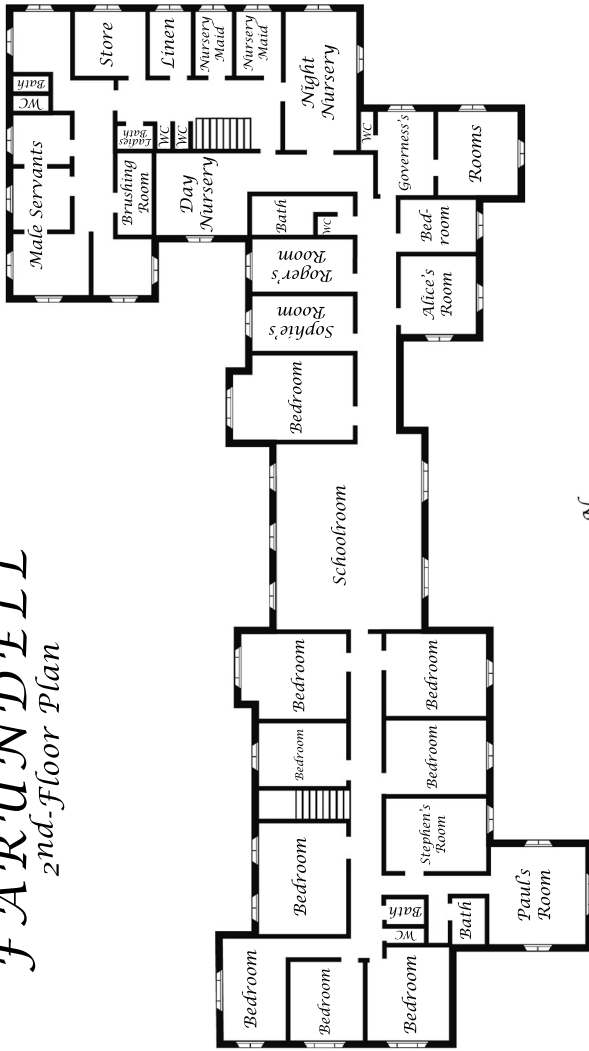
FARUNDELL

Ground-Floor Plan



FARNDELL

2nd-Floor Plan



So spare me not upon this day
Machinery and cartonnages.
The great and little light of heaven employ,
The stars you may as freely squander;
Cliff-drops and water, fire and thunder,
Birds, animals are in supply.
So in this narrow house of boarded space
Creation's fullest circle go to pace,
And walk with leisured speed your spell
From Heaven through the World to Hell.

Goethe, *Faust*

Autumn 1918



Prologue

The force of the explosion flung him to the ground. Searing flash, black nothing, then he floated high over the ruined earth. Smoke roiled from the mouths of the cannon and shells ripped the air but Paul heard only silence, a sweet, singing silence. His body was an abandoned house, far below. He turned, reached for the gilded clouds but something pulled him back; the light slipped through his fingers and he slid down the spiral of pain, and darkness, and dreams.

His father stands above him, sabre drawn, a distant and deadly smile on his face. 'Not yet,' he says.

The sky closes over with a deafening clang; the earth shakes and tosses him down like a rag. Someone moves and whimpers in the mud. 'I'm thirsty,' he says, but his abdomen has been blown away.

'It doesn't matter, carry on,' Paul says.

The girl looked up. 'I can't understand what he's saying, but he won't let go of my hand.'

'You can sit with him, if you like.'

'Thank you, Doctor. What's his name?'

'Asher. Paul Asher. Medical Corps. He was at the clearing station where Captain St John Vere crashed.'

'Oh, is he the one who . . . ?'

'Yes, that's right.'

She pulled her chair closer. 'Paul, can you hear me?'

'I can't.'

She takes his hand. 'Yes, you can.'

The water rises and he floats. 'You can swim,' she says, and without knowing how, he swims, gliding through the water at her side. Desire burns like thirst; he reaches for her and she wraps her legs around him, draws him deeper. He discovers that he can breathe underwater – it's easy, natural; he's always known how.

'Who are you?' he says, but his words float away.

She presses her mouth to his; her tongue speaks to his mind. You know who I am.

He was still holding her hand when he opened his eyes at first light. She'd fallen asleep with her head on her arm, leaning against his bed. She sat up and rubbed her shoulder. 'Good morning,' she said.

Paul tried to speak but his tongue was thick and dry.

'Would you like some water?' She raised his head and held the cup to his mouth; the soft curve of her cheek came near. He was stunned by the clean, smooth perfection of her skin; he couldn't remember when he'd last seen skin that was not filthy, bloody, torn.

'Who are you?' he said.

'My name is Rosalind. You're in the field hospital at Abbeville.'

'What happened?'

'Don't you remember? You pulled him,' she pointed to the next bed, 'out of his aeroplane, which he conveniently managed to crash on top of you, then a shell landed and nearly blew you both up. He's my brother Val. They told me you saved his life.'

Paul searched through the cotton wool that filled his brain. He'd been watching a dogfight; the Camel was hit, the pilot tried

to land in the road, clipped a tree, somersaulted. He'd been running towards it . . . and that was all he could remember.

'Don't worry, you'll live.' She reached for the chart. 'Abrasions and contusions, a broken arm, clavicle and several ribs. There were a few bits of metal in your body but we got them out last night.'

Paul explored his sensations: dull aches, a ferocious headache and a heavy weight on his feet. He raised his head and tried to look.

She pushed him down. 'Lie still.'

'What's on my feet?'

'It's a cat. A rather large cat. He came in on the stretcher with you and we haven't been able to shift him.'

'Madagascar,' Paul said. 'It's Madagascar.'

The cat opened his eyes, yawned and walked up the bed to the pillow where he settled, purring. The girl smiled and stood. 'You should try to sleep some more now, but I'll come back later.' She touched his hand. 'I'll come back.'

The scent of rosewater lingered like a dream; Madagascar's purr droned in his ear. Had she been real?

She swims away and he can't follow, he can't swim any further, exhaustion drags at his limbs. There is a roaring in his ears and blackness all around, mud in his mouth and eyes. The bodies at his feet whimper and moan. Someone is crying for his mother.

It doesn't matter,' Paul says. 'Carry on.' He tries to stand but an immense, invisible hand slams him down and he's swimming again, oh, the relief, swimming deeper and deeper through the cool, sweet water, towards her face as it wavers and changes in the changing light.

Spring 1924



1

Paul gazed down at a tableau of wheels, levers, ropes and chains. It looked as though a giant clock had undergone the tidiest of explosions, or unfoldings, and only just come to rest. Mist curled around its base; a light, gradually brightening, shone from behind the wheels. Thunder rumbled and a trumpet sounded. A troop of animal-faced demons appeared, casting long shadows before them as they swarmed over the structure, pulled ropes, pushed levers, the wheels engaged, began to move. And stopped.

‘Oh, damn.’ The light went out and an angry man strode on to the stage.

At the back of the theatre, Paul took off his dripping hat and waited for his eyes to adjust. He spotted Val in the middle of the stalls, reclining across several seats like an elegant spider. ‘Hello, Val.’

Val turned, disentangled his legs and leapt up. ‘Paul, you came! But you’re soaked, how on earth did you get so wet? Did you swim the Channel?’

‘This is England, it’s raining; what a surprise.’

‘Come and sit. Where’s Madagascar?’

‘I left him at your house with his nose in a kipper. Your cook spoils him.’ Paul dropped into a seat. ‘You look well, Val. Success suits you.’

‘Whereas you look like something Mad dragged in. Even so, it’s marvellous you’ve come. I never imagined you’d be able to tear yourself away from Paris, from Justine, or was it Claudette, or Simone?’

‘Marie, lately. I have torn myself away, altogether away.’

‘Altogether?’

‘I gave it up, Val. My love affair with language has come to an end. I’m tired of her or she’s tired of me; it doesn’t matter which. The result is the same. The more I look at words, the more vacant they become.’

‘The little buggers. I know what you mean. So now what? Are you going back to Boston?’

‘Boston? In a coffin. I’d sooner die than give my father the pleasure of seeing me crawl. I’ll find a job here, some ordinary job.’

‘But what of art, the queen of your heart? And truth, beauty, passion, her handmaidens? Have you forsaken them all?’

‘Hah. They forsook me first. If they want me again, they can find me. I have a cousin in an insurance firm in Fetter Lane; maybe he’ll give me a job, or recommend me to someone. Oh, don’t look so aghast.’

‘Fetter Lane? It sounds positively Dickensian. Will you have to wear a stiff collar and scrape a scrupulous copperplate on to parchment with a quill?’

‘No doubt. Can we not talk about it any more? Tell me about the play – have you changed much? Who’s that angry man down there and what are those wheels all about?’

‘The angry man is Desmond Fanshawe, our esteemed director, and the wheels are his way of adding useless bits of business that can only go wrong. Of course I’ve dulled things down to navigate the antediluvian obscenity laws but our dear little *Nino the Golden Catamite* should still offend a great many people.’ He lit another cigarette from the end of the last. ‘Maggie Damory is

playing the women; she's our big star. Her family and mine go way back – that may explain why she agreed to do this. The rehearsal was meant to begin an hour ago but we're stuck in an eternal purgatory of technical run-throughs. We're opening next week and the damned demons can't get the wheels to turn. Come along, I'll show you our wonders.'

Stagehands were at work among the wheels, whose pulleys had become entangled. They were supposed to rotate a series of gateways, Val explained, through which Nino had to pass; in the final scene they operated the trapdoor as the goddess emerged from the sea.

'It looks very . . . ah . . . complicated,' Paul said.

'Oh, it is, it is. We are in the hands of a true master of the art of complication. It's darling Desmond's very own Deus Ex, God help us. Now look, you must see this – it's my favourite.' A long piece of sheet metal hung in the wings. Val gave it a push and thunder rolled through the theatre. 'It can make the most almighty crash if you give it a good whack, but I've been requested to refrain.'

'Val loves the thunder sheet.' A very pretty dark-haired girl joined them.

'Ah, Sara,' Val said, 'meet my friend Paul Asher. Paul, this is Sara Paragon, the violinist who leads the Chorus. And here is Arlen Winter, our psychopomp.' A tall Negro strolled over. 'Arlen is a countryman of yours, and he's a genius with a trumpet.'

From the orchestra pit came an ironic drumroll as the demons returned to their stations and took up the ropes. Cogs engaged, great wheels with lesser ones; a cheer broke out, the demons pulled and pushed, the wheels acquired momentum.

'Hurrah,' said Val. 'Maybe now we can start.'

Paul is in his room on rue Rosinard. It's raining; grey light falls through the uncurtained window with its view of the wall of the

alley. Sara Paragon raises her violin. 'Listen,' she says, and plays a few bars, then steps through a door Paul hadn't known was there. He follows, but she's disappeared. The room is white and bare, windows open to the sky. Oh yes, he thinks, I remember this room. Scraps of paper cover the floor, each with a word. When he tries to read they blur and fade and change. A door opens on to another room, empty and full of light; beyond there's a hall, with doors in all directions. His footsteps echo on the floorboards and the sound of the violin drifts through the air.

He woke to the soft patter of rain, turned and stretched, unable for a moment to remember where he was. A house with empty rooms, the sound of a violin, words that slipped away. The dream faded and he opened his eyes: Val's house, London.

He put on his dressing gown, rang the bell, lit a cigarette and contemplated the day ahead. He'd made light of it with Val, because Val was incapable of Taking Things Seriously, but in fact the thought of working in a place like Fetter Lane did not fill him with joyous expectation. Wasn't it only common sense to avoid a place with a name like that? He tried to imagine himself as a clerk, in a stiff collar and tie, reporting every day to his post in Fetter Lane, fettered to his post, a long chain leading to an iron collar around his neck. Day after day scraping away with his quill, his spine deformed, his eyes rheumy and dimmed. He would die there, at his post, only discovered when someone noticed that his quill hadn't moved for a week. When they touched him he would turn to powder on the spot, thus saving the cost of a funeral.

A housemaid appeared with his tray, twitched back the curtains, bent to light the fire, vanished. Rain seeped from the sky, a milk cart clanked below and from the streets beyond the square came the ceaseless mutter and hum of motor cars and omnibuses. A pigeon flew by. Paul remembered the first time he'd stayed in this room – Rosalind had brought him home for his

convalescence. He'd lain here for days watching pigeons crossing the window, inventing meanings. One bird, the war would end. Two birds, it would last forever. Three, Rosalind loved him. Four, she didn't.

He pulled his mind back. That was another life. Afterwards, Val had taken him to Paris, and Paris – Paris had changed everything. It was a world like a breaking of worlds, and one night, when perhaps he'd broken enough, he had come upon the notion that he could reinvent himself, remake himself, somehow, in his own image. But it was turning out to be a more ambiguous proposition than he'd imagined, full of subpropositions, preconditions, detours, false clues, red herrings, loops and diversions. He reached for another cigarette. Egyptian Deities, his last extravagance. The picture on the box showed a lady on a throne, a deity he supposed, a child on her knee.

And how the hell was one supposed to know at the time what was a genuine clue, and what an irrelevance or a trap? Which the diversion and which the straight path? All of which anyway assumed there was such a thing as a straight path and where one wanted to go – should one be fortunate enough to have a definite goal in mind – was somewhere that could be approached in a straight line, just by setting off in the correct direction and continuing until one arrived. He'd begun to wonder if there were not, perhaps, some destinations one could only approach sideways, observe in peripheral vision, stalk while seemingly headed elsewhere.

You are a fool, his father's voice sneered. You are wasting your life.

At least the idea of Boston – he could not call it home – made Fetter Lane a somewhat less unappealing prospect. If the refusal to go in one particular direction could be considered a direction, he thought, then let that be my direction in life.

He bathed, shaved, studied his reflection. Could this man be

a clerk? His hair was too long, and wouldn't lay flat. He could get a haircut, but it was the look in the eyes that gave him pause. An appraising, cautious look, and under the caution? The look of an animal about to bolt. 'Come on, animal,' he said, 'it'll be all right. You're the one who wants to be warm and fed, remember?'

Fetter Lane was as narrow as its name; Bonnerby, Pinchon & Pritchett occupied a tall building halfway up the road. Paul opened the shiny black door, approached a clerk at a desk, asked for Mr Horace Pritchett, gave his name, sat down to wait. Posts and fetters were nowhere to be seen, but that did not stop him from imagining them in rows, out of sight in back rooms.

Young men marched in and out, up and down the polished stairs, bearing papers and boxes and files. What were they thinking about, with their compressed lips, their airs of importance, or urgency, or determination? Credits and debits, losses and gains, valuations and documentations, qualifications and accreditations, certifications and authorisations. They began to look like a flock of automated penguins and he made an effort to remember that they were men like him. There might even be some among them whose great goal in life was not Clerk in Insurance; away from Fetter Lane they might be poets or artists, philosophers or mystics, and perhaps other, stranger notions than facts and figures percolated beneath their smooth exteriors. He looked closely as they hurried by, but any wild thoughts going on in there made no outward sign.

After a time someone came to escort him up two flights of stairs and along a corridor lined with frock-coated, gilt-framed Partners, each more august and dispiriting than the last. The master penguins.

'Paul, what a surprise.' Cousin Horace, corpulent and pink,

stood behind an enormous desk. ‘Sit down, my boy, sit down. Haven’t seen you for years.’ He shuffled papers, looked at his watch. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Very well, thank you. And you?’

‘Yes, quite well, thank you. Terribly busy, you know. What brings you here, if I may ask?’

‘Of course. I won’t take up much of your time. I just stopped by to ask about a job.’

‘A job? For you? So, you are better?’

‘Better than what?’

‘I mean, you have recovered?’

‘Recovered? From what?’

‘From your . . . er . . . problem.’

‘Which problem?’ Paul asked. ‘There have been several.’

‘Now, young man, we all know you have been through terrible things, and of course they take their toll. One must not try to deny it, everyone understands.’

‘Understands what? I’m very sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘What have you been doing lately?’ Horace’s tone was patient, careful.

‘Well, I’ve been living in Paris – you remember, I went there with Val St John Vere after the influenza . . . after his sister died. I’ve been writing, or I should say trying to write. I had a few poems published in *Littérature*, and a short story in *New Writers of 1920*, and I wrote a novel which made a lovely fire, although it didn’t last very long.’

‘So you deny you have suffered a . . . how should I put it . . . mental collapse?’

‘Mental what? No, I mean yes, I do deny it. At least I think I do. Where did you hear that?’

‘Your father told us about your . . . difficulties.’

‘Ah yes.’ Paul stroked his jaw. ‘Those pesky little difficulties of

mine.’ Val would love this, he thought. It’s just like his plays. ‘And when did these difficulties . . . occur?’

‘Three years ago, more or less, I believe. Don’t you . . . don’t you even remember?’

‘No, I don’t. Tragic, isn’t it?’ Three years ago he’d written his father a last letter telling him precisely what to do with his advice and destroyed all his subsequent letters unread.

‘Your father did say, my boy, if you ever came to us we should urge you to return to America where you could receive the best possible care.’ Horace nodded his chin and smiled, though his small eyes were wary.

Paul was tempted to jump on to the desk and bark. But that would be childish. He stood. ‘Thank you for your time; this has been vastly more entertaining than I had dared hope. Good day.’

He strode past the smirking Partners, down the stairs and into the street. He didn’t know whether to laugh, cry or kick something. He walked, lit a cigarette, walked on. When he looked around, he was in the Strand. Stranded he was – but not fettered, a little voice said, though he ignored it.

He found his way down to the Embankment. The skies had lightened and watery sunlight played over the river. It was on the surge; its slick dark skin swirled with cross-currents and whirlpools, merging and parting, twining and plaiting. He felt a twist of vertigo, lifted his eyes and looked back across the road. The mass of buildings towered like giant anthills.

How amusing, he thought – I’d hated the idea of being a clerk in Fetter Lane and now I’m very annoyed I shan’t be. No, of course, it’s not that. It’s my father, reaching all this way to fuck with my life. The bastard. What a malicious lie. Did he believe it himself? Would that make it better or worse? Paul spat into the river and turned away. Lucky escape, he heard the small voice say, and this time he nodded. He lit a cigarette and walked west under the sharpening shadows of the plane trees,

following the curve of the Thames upstream. He'd begun to enjoy the day.

The next morning he perused the classified advertisements. A room, he discovered, would cost him at least ten shillings a week practically anywhere in London. With money for food, cigarettes, and so on, he needed to earn eight pounds a month at the very minimum, but the jobs paying that amount all required skills he lacked. There was a great demand for mechanics of every sort, but he could hardly tell a nut from a bolt. Also, of course, clerks, but everyone wanted experience and references. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that he lacked any qualifications for anything whatsoever. He made a mental list of his more notable achievements. West Point Military Academy: sent down. Harvard Medical School: quit. The Great War: survived, more or less. That did not qualify him for any of the jobs listed here. Outside, birds were singing and sunshine spilled across the table. He tucked the paper under his arm and went to the park.

Young mothers and nannies with babies in prams promenaded by the lake. Everyone looked content; everyone looked like they were where they belonged. Paul sat on a bench in the sun. Children were playing a game in which a stone was a castle, a shrub a forest, a stick a sword, a muddy bit of lawn the field of chivalry, a hapless dog a caparisoned charger. How easily they made it all mean something. Did I ever see the world so? Sad world. He kicked it gently with his heel. Sad old world, that used to mean something and doesn't any more. Still shone on by the sun, though, and that, at least, is still free. He raised his face and closed his eyes. I wish I could sit in the sun forever, he thought, that life could be as simple as sitting in the sun. Why shouldn't it be? After all, I'm doing no harm, and who could say, whatever their profession, they'd done no harm? If only one could eat

sunlight one could live very simply, though probably not in England.

‘. . . roof leaked, and rats . . . couldn’t find any . . . bit the bailiff’s . . . baby was dead . . . never heard from him again . . . sister stole my boots . . . wasn’t no use . . . don’t care if they ever . . . tried and tried, then . . . lost the damn key, didn’t he?’

The rough, sour voices crowded the steamy air of the teashop in Waterloo. Paul ordered a ha’penny bun and a cup of tea, pushed the overflowing ashtray to one side and rested his elbows on the two worn places indicated on the oilcloth. The bun and the tea arrived with a bang and a slop; the bun was stale and the tea scalded his tongue.

The past week had taught him that most items in the Positions Offered columns referred to positions no longer being offered, that had perhaps never really been offered at all. He’d fallen into a drifting shoal of men, swept into the anterooms of hundreds of offices and back out to the street. Some fellows’ faces were becoming as familiar as old friends’. He finished his bun and lit a cigarette; a man at the next table stopped talking to his companions, glanced at Paul and made a little cough. Paul offered the box.

The man lifted a cigarette, sniffed it. ‘Ah, Turkish. Haven’t had one for years. No, no light yet, thank you, I’ll save it for later if you don’t mind.’ Three other faces leaned closer; three hands reached out with delicate, purposeful greed and when Paul withdrew the box it was empty.

He emerged into pelting rain and a chill wind nearly tore the hat from his head. He trudged through traffic-clogged streets down to the river, stuffed his hat in his pocket and set out across the bridge.

‘. . . resurrection . . . bedtime story . . . never fall in love with a client . . . gossip is deadlier . . . give him love, or cash . . . what

language was that? . . . oldest family . . . blood and a bone . . . his sister found . . . monkeys under the table . . . not the words, only the definitions . . .’

Paul sat on the stairs with a glass of champagne. Val’s opening-night party filled the house. The first performance of *Nino the Golden Catamite* had been a sell-out, though half the audience were Val’s friends and the other half obviously hadn’t known what they were attending. Perhaps, Val had said, they thought a catamite was a small feline. The event had been punctuated by angry protests and fistfights; a small riot spilled into the street. Val was so delighted that Paul wondered if he’d stirred it up himself from the back of the stalls where he’d lurked.

There was a flurry at the door as Maggie Damory arrived with the movie producer Albert Laski, who to Val’s extreme consternation kissed his hand and declared the play a ‘vork uff cheenius’; he refused to relinquish the hand until Val consented to an immediate film adaptation, and promised to write the screenplay himself. On Maggie’s other arm Paul recognised her husband, the painter and occultist Jarlath Quinn, in his famous cloak and broad-brimmed Borsalino. His omnivorous sexuality was a legend in Paris, where he’d been a crony of Aleister Crowley. Someone had said he was a black magician, whatever that meant.

‘You look lonely.’ Sara Paragon sat down on the step beside him.

‘In this mob? No chance. Sara, you were splendid tonight. You play wonderfully.’

‘Did you think so? Desmond didn’t allow us to rehearse. He wanted us to seize the inspiration of the moment, as he put it, but I was terrified there wouldn’t be any inspiration, or I wouldn’t be able to seize it. Do you have any idea what I mean?’

‘Yes, in fact I do. So what happened? Did you prepare something, just in case?’

‘I did, a few bars, to get me started in case I froze. I wouldn’t

have dared go on otherwise. But I didn't need it. I touched the bow to the strings and . . . I don't know how to describe it. It felt like the music was coming from somewhere else; it already existed, and all I could do was let it happen. I don't understand it myself. Probably I need some more champagne.' She grabbed a glass from a passing footman and danced away.

At three, the first editions of the papers arrived and they gathered in the drawing room with the reviews.

"Valentine St John Vere, Viscount Hetheringham," Maggie read, "DFC, MC, DSO, VC, has turned upon the hand that fed him and sunk his teeth to the bone. The decay of Western Civilisation is further advanced than we thought."

'Oh, they have no idea,' Val said. 'Say, rather, the rot at the very core.'

"He has sullied the London stage with this vicious, vituperative, blasphemous, disgusting . . ."

'Mind, you're spitting.'

'Can't help it, *he* must have been. ". . . assault not only on our morals but on our very language . . ."'

'How can you assault morals without assaulting language? I promise you, it can't be done.'

'Wait,' Paul said. 'They're not all so upset with you. Listen to this: "Avant the Avant-Garde. Valentine St John Vere's surrealist mystery play passed right over the heads of most of its audience at the New Alexandra Theatre last night. Few will have recognised its source in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, a great moral tale of magic gone wrong and the quest for redemption. The eponymous hero has to pass through a series of gateways that themselves became hurdles for the audience to overcome. Regrettably, though not surprisingly, most fell at the first, and few remained to see the play's powerful and indeed moralistic climax. I would like to compliment St. John Vere, who I understand has resided in Paris of late, on writing a play that is sure to be one of

the most misunderstood works of our time. It is commonly said that London is twelve years behind Paris in matters of culture and art; if this is so, *Nino the Golden Catamite* may have to wait many years to receive the recognition it deserves.”

‘What a remarkably perceptive fellow,’ Val said over his shoulder as he was called to the telephone.

‘The reviews,’ he said when he returned, ‘are now mere curiosities. We have received the ultimate accolade: it’s been cancelled. That was the theatre. They’ve been told if they permit another performance they’ll be prosecuted, as will I. So will you, Maggie, and Fanshawe, and a list of other people. I’d love the chance to defend it, but one can’t expect them to carry on for our sakes. They’d be forced out of business.’

‘Ach, one must be philosophical, is it not so?’ said Laski. ‘And so we start the film immediately, yes, tomorrow.’

Val put another record on the gramophone, turned it up loud, and induced Laski to attempt a Charleston. Maggie sat on the long sofa beside Paul and Madagascar, kicked off her shoes and tucked up her legs. ‘What a magnificent cat,’ she said.

‘His name is Madagascar. Mad, this is Maggie Damory.’

Madagascar looked steadily at Maggie, then blinked.

‘Blink back,’ Paul said. ‘It shows you’re friendly.’

Maggie blinked her green eyes, and Madagascar blinked his. After a time he permitted her to scratch briefly behind his ears.

‘You’re Val’s friend Paul, aren’t you?’ she said. ‘You live in Paris, I’d heard – what on earth brings you to dreary, backward old London? Or did you come just for our one-night stand?’

‘I did come for Val’s opening, but also to look for a job.’

‘Oh? What sort?’

‘Anything. I’m not qualified for much.’

‘Well, as it so happens my father – he lives at Farundell, our house in Oxfordshire – has decided he wants to write his memoirs. He’s blind, you see, and not terribly well, and he needs someone

to help. He asked if I knew anyone, and I didn't, but now . . . here you are. You can read and write, can't you? That's all that's required. Oh, can you operate a typewriting machine?

'Yes . . .'

'Splendid. So, what do you think?'

'I think it's an extremely kind offer, but Maggie, he doesn't know me – what if he doesn't like me? And then there's Madagascar.'

'Oh don't worry. He'll like you, he's not in the least a county sort, you know – they'll all like you, and Madagascar too, of course, if the two of you can bear to be country cats for a while? Or perhaps you're thinking it'll be deadly dull. Compared to Paris it is, although not as bad as one might suppose – lots of interesting people come to Farundell all the time. Do say you'll do it, please.'

'Well, I . . .'

'Can you go right away? He's awfully urgent about it, now he's got a bee in his bonnet. All you have to do is take the train – the nearest town is Exley. Val can explain.'

'Er . . .'

'Wonderful. I'll telephone to let them know. Father will be so pleased.'

Paul admired how neatly he'd been handled. Did he fancy being an old man's secretary? Did it matter whether he fancied it or not? It was a job, and Madagascar seemed to have given his approval. 'All right,' he said. 'We'll give it a try.'

A jazz band arrived, friends of Arlen; Maggie got up to sing. A cocktail virtuoso practised his lethal art in the corner; the noise level increased, the smoke, the incoherence of conversations. A walk was what he needed. He found his coat and hat and, when he turned to leave, Sara was at his side.

'Are you going out?' she said. 'Would you like to walk down to the river? The thing is I need to go home that way . . .'

‘Let’s go,’ Paul said. He helped her on with her coat and offered to carry the violin, but she said she’d feel unbalanced without it.

They walked in thickening fog along St James’s Park, where the willows loomed like giant haystacks and an owl hooted. Sara raised her face for a kiss. The owl hooted again and he whispered, ‘Who, who are you, Miss Sara Paragon?’

She laughed and, taking his hand, drew him on. Passing the bulk of Parliament, felt rather than seen, they walked on to Westminster Bridge and paused under a streetlight. The deep tolls of Big Ben moved through the air in slow waves. Sara took out her violin and tightened the bow. ‘It won’t like all this damp, but maybe a minute or two.’ She tested the tuning, took a deep breath, closed her eyes and began to play.

The music rose and swirled in the mist; it flowed into Paul and blossomed like a memory, like a dream. He tried to defend himself but it was too late; tears burned in his eyes. He turned, pressed his face into his hands. The music pierced him, flayed him, sliced through him. He reached for words but none were right; it was love and loss, beauty and sorrow, and some nameless, elusive light at the heart of it all, that he’d longed for, searched for, wanted for so long . . . It doesn’t matter, carry on, it doesn’t matter, carry on; by the time the music ended on a long, wavering note he was able to turn to Sara with a smile.

She put the violin away and kissed him once, hard. ‘Thank you for being here,’ she said, ‘for listening.’

They walked on in silence, footsteps muted. He kissed her goodnight at her door and returned to the bridge. He stared into the fog, listening for echoes of the music, of that feeling. The night was thick all around him – was he where he thought? For a terrifying moment the bridge and the city dissolved and he was back in the Flanders mud. No! He stamped his foot. This was real, solid, not a dream that could slip out of his control.

'This is real,' he said aloud. 'I am awake.' He forced himself to picture the road ahead: the end of the bridge at the Embankment, Parliament on the left, Whitehall on the right, St James's Park, Birdcage Walk, the Palace, the Royal Mews. He sent himself forth on the imagined route, and made his way safely to Val's.