Bowels Jones

Alun Richards

'Mr Bowcott Jones has the gripe,' Fan Bowcott Jones said to the Portuguese guide who had inquired. '*La grippe, n'est-ce pas*?'

'Sardines in charcoal?' the guide said with a charming smile and a fey waggle of his braceleted wrist. He was young, dark, and beautiful, with neat hips swathed in scarlet flares like a girl's. 'Cook in charcoal, no? Just the peoples from the hotel?'

'No, he's not feeling well. *L'estomac*!'

The guide persisted in not understanding.

'In a boat with fisherman's, Portuguese style?'

'I shall come.'

'But of course…'

'But Mr Bowcott Jones is inconvenienced.'

'*Vour parlez français très bien*,' the guide said, and took out a handsome red purse. 'I shall require two hundred escudos for the two.'

They stood outside the bedroom door on the fourth floor of the Hotel Lagos in the Algarve. The guide had come all the way up the stairs since the lift was out of order, but Mrs Bowcott Jones could not make herself understood. The Portuguese were simple and charming, but the confidence with which they assumed they understood everything was profoundly irritating. They were grave and serious, more attentive than the Spanish, and the food, if you ate it in reasonable quantities, was

infinitely more value for money. But this year, like the last, Bowcott had found a pub where they gave the impression of listening to him, and once again, it had led to excess.

Mrs Bowcott Jones sighed, searched her vocabulary, and finally said in a mixture of Spanish, French and Portuguese, overlaid with a sympathetic Welsh valley accent: '*Solamente uno*!' She held up one finger. 'Señor Jones – non! *Pash favor, uno?*'

'Ah, jest one?' said the guide, flashing his teeth.

'*Pash favor*,' Mrs Bowcott Jones said again, returning his smile. They were extraordinarily sexy, these nut-brown boys. If you gave your mind to that sort of thing.

'One hun'red escudos for je..st the one?'

'*Momento*,' Mrs Bowcott Jones went into the room and closed the door firmly behind her. Now her expression changed and her voice became harder as she looked down at the gross, fleshy bulk of her husband who lay motionless in bed, his chin bowed and thick knees doubled up over his comfortable belly in the attitude of an elephantine embryo. Bowcott was bilious again.

'No good asking me for sympathy. You're fifty-six years of age, very likely Chairman of the bench next year, but the moment you're abroad, you're like a sailor off a tanker or something,' his wife said sharply. The neat figure of the waiting guide had irritated her, and now the lump of Bowcott's heavy form reminded her of the white rhino in Bristol Zoo, the highlight of school trips when she was a child, and later a primary-school teacher.

Bowcott attempted to speak, failed, and said nothing. Years ago, he had thought his wife a little common, but it had the effect of increasing his self-importance. He could condescend from time to time. But now he could just moan and was in danger of being sick.

'Oh, Fan… Oh, Duw…'

'Whatever you think you're doing, I'm going on the sardine trip.'

He opened his mouth once more but realised that his lips were partially stuck together, and gave himself an intelligence report. Booze *and* fags, he thought. He'd meant to stick to cigars.

'Just the people from the hotel. It's a deserted beach,' his wife said with some emphasis. 'And there's no need to make a face like that. The people on the tour are very nice people. English, of course, but they all asked after you at breakfast.'

Bowcott gave a little belch. He was getting old. One night on the tiles meant that there were days that got lost, slipped past the memory, notching themselves on to his stomach, however, like knife slashes on a branch.

'Where's your wallet? The guide is waiting.'

That was another thing. He couldn't remember where he'd put his wallet. He rolled over in a pool of sweat and felt under the pillow, but it wasn't there. He could not remember what he'd done with his shirt and shorts for that matter. Avoiding his wife's eye, he slid a glance in the direction of a nearby chair. But his shorts and shirt were missing too.

'I washed them,' Fan said darkly. 'Well, I couldn't send them to the laundry. I daren't. And your wallet wasn't in them. Oh, for goodness' sake, what have you done with it?'

She had been asleep when he had eventually got home in the early hours of the morning. He had been in the English Tavern in the village, a place he privately referred to as a hot spot, but things had got a little too hot, and now an extraordinary phrase kept repeating itself in his mind.

'*For Chrissakes, the bogey's got his shooter out*!'

It was such an alarming phrase for a man like him to have heard at all. There was a note of hysteria in it, but as he tried to fit it into place, he recalled incidents from the previous night, images floating into consciousness like the interrupted trailer of some incredibly seedy film. What had happened this time?

His wife turned impatiently to the dressing table drawer where they kept the passports. The wallet was not there

either, but his passport was. Hidden between the folded pages, there were a number of high denomination notes which she knew he kept there for emergencies. They had always smuggled a little currency out of the UK. You never knew when it would be needed with Bowcott. She took two five-hundred escudo notes and snapped them in his face.

'I wouldn't be surprised if I didn't really *spend* today. Some of that ornamental silver is expensive enough,' she said punishingly. She folded the money into her purse, put on the pink straw hat which she'd bought for the occasion in San Antonio, picked up her Moroccan handbag, and finally the Spanish stole from the package holiday four years ago, and then marched to the door,

'The mixture is beside your bed,' she said at the door.

'Mixture?' he said hoarsely. He sounded like the victim of a pit disaster.

'The kaolin compound you had from Lucas Thomas the Chemist. Four spoonfuls a day,' she said getting it wrong. *Two spoonfuls four times a day*, the instructions read, carefully written in Lucas Thomas' feminine handwriting. 'Although what Lucas Thomas knows about conditions here, I can't imagine. Portugal is not Dan y Graig.'

Her last words. She slammed the door which did not close and he heard her brave Spanish once more.

'*Vamos a ir. A los sardinhos*,' she said to the guide who had remained.

'*Senhora* is multi-speaking?' the guide said politely. 'In your absence, the lift is working.'

'*Obrigard*,' she pronounced carefully. She went to the first three lessons of the language classes in the Women's Institute every year. It gave her enough to be going on with, apart from prices which she insisted on having written down.

Still immobile, Bowcott heard the lift descend, feeling like an overworked seismograph. His stomach was so distended that each part of his anatomy seemed now to distinguish sounds, as well as record its own special suffering. Although

by now the Bowcott Joneses were veterans of the short quick trips all along the Costas, he always forgot himself sooner or later. If it wasn't the sun, it was the food or the wine, and although he usually reserved the big bust-up for the end of the stay when he could at least be in flying distance of Lucas Thomas' healing potions, this year he had gone over the top on the second night.

Perhaps it was a mistake to come to the Algarve? In one week last year, he seemed to get to know the town, and they had returned expecting to be celebrities, only to find that last year's crowd had moved on. But it wasn't only that. The trouble was within Bowcott himself. As his wirey, ninety-three-year-old mother said, 'Wherever we go, we take ourselves with us', and it applied absolutely to Bowcott, just as much as did her other countless sayings: 'He would go too far… Beyond,' as she said, using the word in its dark, Welsh sense; and she was right.

This year again, there was the extraordinary feeling of Welshness which came upon him abroad. At home, the valleys being what they were, if you'd had a dinner jacket before the war, and there hadn't been a lavatory 'out the back' for three generations, you were almost minor nobility. Not to have had anything to do with the pits was blue-blood itself, and since the Bowcott Joneses had been wholesale fruiterers for years, he was a man of property and substance, and had always been so. But get him abroad, and the old ilk was still there, a wildness of spirit and a capacity for living recklessly that was now beginning to shake his fifty-six-year-old frame as much as it delighted his image of himself at the imbibing time. Fan, fair play, was as good as gold normally. A collier's daughter wasn't going to moan about a drop too much, or the occasional accident, hygienic or otherwise, but this time, there were additional complications. The world was changing, Portugal and Wales, and Bowcott had suddenly become caught up in a sea of feelings, even ideas, that were strange to him. If only he could remember, he was

sure it was all very frightening. Something had happened which placed him on the map. But what was it?

It was not simply that he had taken too much to eat and drink. Not this time. And he doubted whether his condition could in any way be attributed to Lucas Thomas' fawning habit of dispensing without prescription. Both of them regarded the valley's solitary Indian practitioner with some reserve, and for matters of the bowels, Lucas was very good on the whole. But perhaps the streptotriad tablets, advised and dispensed as a prophylactic against gyppy tummy, were too strong. For Welsh mams with filial problems and an aversion to the smell of alcohol, Lucas actually kept animal chlorophyll tablets of staggering breath-cleansing propensities. Perhaps the strepto-what's-its were also out of Lucas' VIP draw? Perhaps between them, they had been too clever by far? Was the thin, anaemic figure of Lucas Thomas, pinhead ever bobbing and smiling obsequiously behind his affected Douglas-Home lenses, *a guilty figure*?

In fairness, Bowcott did not think so. Lucas had seen him right through a number of marathons in the last two years, Twickenham, Murrayfield, Dublin and even the Paris trip which was an exploder, a real gut-buster, yet Bowcott was still standing after sixty-four hours of playing and drinking time when former Welsh rugby internationals had gone under the table, Triple Crown Championship notwithstanding.

Talk about Bowcott and you weren't talking about a cauliflower-eared colliery fitter. As Lucas Thomas said, 'Old Bowcott knows his Raymond Postgate. Hell of a *bon viveur* ackshually.'

But others put it less delicately.

'By God, you've got a constitution, Bowcott!' a former Welsh centre had said when he walked off the plane at Rhoose before they drove into Cardiff. Alone of the party, Bowcott arrived clanking with duty-free booze, fags and perfume for Fan, and walked, what is more, despite an inflamed eye or two, with a spring in his step. He might have

been bringing the mythical Triple Crown home in his back pocket.

'I just keep in with Lucas Thomas,' he usually said with a snide tug at his clipped moustache. 'One needs a chap to look after one.' What he really meant was that he couldn't abide that Indian ghoul who didn't seem to understand the need for a blowout or the demands of a palate like his own.

But now he was knackered. The wogs had got him in the guts. He slipped into the vernacular when he felt sorry for himself, and he lay on the bed like an infantry officer who'd been bayoneted against the trench wall. He felt as if they'd done for him good and all, his Triple Crown constitution notwithstanding. Once again, the hoodoo was down below the belt. It felt like snakebite and gave him second thoughts. Perhaps he should have gone to New Zealand anyway and followed the Lions? He would have, but for Fan, although when he read the advertisement, 'Six hundred pounds and two years to pay', he'd felt tempted, but then decided against it. It wasn't so much that he couldn't afford it, but with payment on the never-never, it meant that a right lot would have been going on the trip. Of course, Bowcott was no snob on a rugby trip but, sport apart, he had a position to keep up as a magistrate. 'Out of town, we South Walians are all much the same,' he used to say with a twinkle whenever he addressed the Lodge or the Rotarians, but the truth was, New Zealand was too far for Lucas Thomas' ministrations. Lucas had always been his secret weapon.

His former adviser, he now thought bitterly. He wanted to think of anything rather than the muddied events of the previous night. But that damned voice returned. That incredible sentence…

'*For Chrissakes, the bogey's got his shooter out*!'

It was a common English voice, but for the moment, he could not put a face to it. He knew the police were involved too, but fortunately not with him. That was a relief. He closed his eyes and tried to trace back the roots of his

involvement, but his mother's voice came back to him. She was always uncannily present after remorse-begetting situations.

'*Bowcott, you will always be judged by the company you keep*.'

'*For Chrissakes, the bogey's got his shooter out*.'

That was duologue for the record books.

'*Your father was a man of substance. Admittedly, he marched with the miners in '29, but of course, they were a lot of rodneys, half of them, not Welsh anyway*.'

'Welsh… Welsh…' he groaned. What memories on a Portuguese morning! Roots were always a problem, had bothered him when he and Fan had taken up their position at the bar near the swimming pool yesterday. Fan had put on her sundress and he wore the khaki shorts and short-sleeved bush shirt which he still affected on these occasions. He'd also worn a straw fedora and the thick leather belt he'd bought in Malaga two years before. There was, as ever, the District Commissioner look that he cultivated before he let his hair down. Commissioned in the RASC, he'd been in Imphal later in the war and, now and again, let the phrase 'Wingate's mob' drop. It gave an impression that was not strictly accurate, but now most people did not remember, and he'd just qualified for the Burma Star so sucks to anybody who challenged his credentials. He was President of the local British Legion anyway, and his knees were brown enough in the old days. He's been around, as they said, quite long enough to look after himself.

Why then, had things gone wrong?

He cast his mind back to early morning. A shaky day had begun beside the hotel swimming pool where English from Romford had arrived in large numbers. Previously, he and Fan had always found what Fan called 'a good class of people' on holiday. She meant rather far-back, posh accents, persons verging on county stock, justices of the peace at least. These, the Bowcott Joneses either accepted or did not. Ex-

Indian Army people, they got on well with anybody military who drank an occasional excess if you wanted a definition. In previous years, they'd met a very engaging old boy, Sir Philip Somebody-or-Other, and his wife from Bushey, and she'd also been nice with it. Nice with his full-time drinking, that is to say. In fact, on that holiday, she and Fan had had two spare-time drunks for husbands if you wanted to put it in an unkindly way. It was what they had in common, a circumstance that immediately rose above geography and class. But now both these veterans of the bottle were dead, and over the years, the Bowcott Joneses had noticed that the people who went on package tours had changed, and that was the start of it yesterday by the pool, a decided lowering of the tone.

The irony was that they could have tolerated a Dai Jones, or a couple of Rodneys. In the previous year, they had taken to an Irish couple and been pleased to show them the ropes, but the Romford English were quite impossible. They were careful with their money, always checking their change, wrongly suspecting the waiters of robbing them, often shouting with those whining Home Counties accents, sometimes leaving the best part of the asparagus, drinking beer with meals instead of wine, moaning about tipping habits, and making no attempt to speak the language. Bowcott who always called all foreign currencies 'chips', tipped lavishly, and when tight, insisted he was *Pays de Galles*, and had little jokes with the waiters, like announcing as he came into the dining-room, '*El Presidente arribe*!' or '*Voilà la Chef de Policia*!' in shoni-foreign language, and the fact that he attempted to communicate delighted everybody. It told everybody that he was a large jokey man, and not mean, and the waiters gave them better service and huge, daily smiles. As at home, he felt a character and was richer for it, but yesterday, for the first time, the Romford lot had put the kybosh on it, and more than anything, their voice infuriated him.

There was a child with freckles who did nothing she was told and whose parents could not stop talking. You did not take an early morning gin by the bougainvillea to listen to them.

'Emma… Emma, don't go into the pool.'

'Emma, you'll get orl red.'

'Emma, if your brother's bein' a berk, there's no need for you to be.'

'You tell him, Dad. If he think's he's goin' to get away with that for change of a hundred 'scudos, he've got another think comin'.'

'Go on, Dad, tell him. You was in the Army.'

'Pardon? Pardon? Isn't the toilets' system rotten? Pooh… Raw sewage, I could smell. Reelly…'

Listening, Bowcott had never felt more snobbish. And years ago, if anybody had said Tom, Dick or Harry were coming abroad, he would have protested valiantly, but he sadly realised that now it was true, and felt vaguely ashamed. Unless they were careful, they were going to have a thin time of it. Very well, the thing to do was to cut loose from the package tour and investigate the terrain.

'*Emma! Emma, come and put your nix on*!'

That bloody child… To get away from Emma, and Emma's red-necked parents, Bowcott anchored himself permanently in the far corner of the bar, leaving Fan to snooze under the sun shade. He ordered a second gin and tonic (large), and looked philosophically at the glass.

'*Bom dia*,' he managed to the barman.

The barman smiled, and in response, Bowcott showed him a trick with Worcester sauce. A minute drop cleared the rime from a grimy escudo and the barman was suitably impressed. Thereupon, for devilment, Bowcott sprinkled a little sauce into his third gin and tonic, no more than a drop, but enough to give the teasing, iron-man impression that broke the monotony of the morning. And, after that, he had to have another one to clear the taste away. Then there was the sun.

Although his body was shaded by the canopy of the bar, his legs were burning, but the moment he decided to take a dip to cool off, what amounted to a Romford water-polo team arrived and made that impossible.

'To you, Georgie! Georgie! Not out of the pool! Oh, shit, you've knocked a bottle over.'

Bowcott woke Fan under the sunshade. She was a marathon sleeper.

'I think I'll have a stroll down the Vill'. I don't think I shall spend much time here.'

She blinked amiably.

'Be back for lunch?'

'Of course.'

'I should cover the back of your neck if I were you.'

She sounded like his mother. He nodded, found his fedora, buttoned his wallet pocket, and marched away, four gins down. The hotel, a hastily completed building especially created for the package trade, was surprisingly elegant with marble vistas and lavish copper fittings, reminiscent of the Spanish paradors. It would have been splendid if it weren't for the people at present in it, Bowcott thought. He now saw the Romford mob flitting in and out of it like fleas, their twanging voices affecting his nervous system so that he actually twitched once or twice. Getting old, he thought. Getting old and finding Buggins everywhere. He was pleased with that phrase. It was rather Army.

So it was in his District Commissioner mood that he walked down to the village, fat legs, heavy buttocks, belted girth and thick arms swinging as he affected a military gait along the rough, cobbled track. Several *burros* drawing carts passed him, their aged, black-shirted drivers eyeing him inscrutably. It was a poor country, he noted once more. Every piece of woodwork needed a coat of paint, plaster flaked from the walls of the narrow cottages, and the burnt, arid soil behind them was lifeless and without green. There was not a flower to be seen, and the children ran about

bare-footed in the streets while mangy dogs stretched out in the shade, and, here and there, a caged bird sat lifelessly outside the houses. The few Portuguese pedestrians he saw, lowered their eyes when they passed him, or else paid no attention. They were neither surly nor obsequious, just there, passive spectators of the doings of the Lisbon speculators who'd brought the tourists there.

Poor peasants, Bowcott thought. Sad old men and women in black, unaware of the world that was changing about them. He felt vaguely sorry for them, but he was too much of a man of the world to entertain the idea that anything could be done for them. Two soldiers came around the corner, their shabby red berets, lounging gait and lacklustre boots catching his eye. For a second, he half expected them to salute, but they were just peasant soldiers, homesick boys without a spark of life left in them. He felt sorry for them as well, and at the bottom of the hill where he passed a small infirmary for the tubercular, he felt that half the soldiers he had seen might well have been garrisoned there. Once again, he felt sorry. Fair play, he thought, the old wogs never had much of a chance and didn't even look inclined to do much for themselves. Perhaps it was the heat?

By now, the back of his neck was burning. It was August and the wind that blew from Spain stayed there for the month, but he walked on masterfully, tipping the straw hat back. He never wore sunglasses on principle. You could never see what a man was thinking in sunglasses, and he detested people who wore them indoors which was scarcely reason for not wearing them ever, but he did not. The sahibs never did, he seemed to remember, so he did not either.

Presently, he came to a little square where there was a First World War memorial, and for no accountable reason, he stood for a moment and doffed his hat in memory of the dead. If you'd asked him, he couldn't remember on whose side the Portuguese had fought in that war, but memorials always affected him. His father's two brothers had been with

the tunnellers of Messines and had not returned, and Bowcott had an immense respect for military ceremonial, often stating that in the period of the two minutes' silence on Armistice Day, he resolutely attempted to remember faces of the dead he had known. It was somehow always an intensely moving experience to him, coupled with the thought of lives that might have been.

He stood for a full two minutes holding the straw fedora to his chest, then strode to an adjoining bar whose proprietor had noticed his little vigil.

'*La Guerra*?' the proprietor said curiously.

Bowcott gave a stiff military nod and sat astride a bar stool as he ordered a beer. From Omdurman to Mametz Wood, from Monte Cassino to Caen and back to Vimy Ridge, his mind had strayed to the accompaniment of ghostly bugle notes. The faces of the dead… How young they were… Callow boys for the most part, legions of them with no chance of living, the missing generations.

He switched his attention to the proprietor, erupted into two languages simultaneously, capping them with stern valleys posh.

'*Las guerras lo mismo todo el mundo*,' he said portentously.

'*Ah, si*,' said the proprietor with a wise nod.

A few more words, a few more beers, a good tip, and Bowcott was off again, feeling rather better. It always paid to communicate with the locals. He passed the cobbler's shop where last year the cobbler had encompassed his extravagant paunch with a specially made belt from horse leather. 'Got a little chap I know in Portugal to run it up one morning,' he told Lucas Thomas the Chemist. 'Did it on the spot. There's such a thing as service left in the world.' ('That Bowcott Jones has been around,' Lucas told his wife.)

Bowcott looked in through the cobbler's doorway, but a different face greeted him, and rather than inquire, he backed away. There was still the same smell of leather and sawdust

in the air, but the old man behind the counter was not half as jolly as the jester the previous year. It might have been an omen. But Bowcott went on up the street. He was heading for the English Tavern where an old Kenya Planter had set up a pub, English style, and where, the year before, he had drunk copiously with much good-humoured joss in the company of like-minded fellows of his own age. They were exiles for the most part, chaps who had got out of England for one reason or another. He liked them best because they had given him the opportunity of playing up the Welsh side of his nature. 'Wouldn't think of living in England myself!' he had announced, and with his jokes and quips, the alacrity with which he bought his round, he was eminently acceptable, and indeed, the nights had passed in much the same way as they did in his local at home. The bonhomie of drinkers was an international thing, a safe and comfortable world in which to float.

The taverner's name was Matt, late King's African Rifles, a Kenya wallah with a prodigious thirst, and a joker into the bargain. Then, Bowcott had been *Bwana Mc'wber* Jones, and Matt was *My man*, and they'd done a little Forces number, *Ten cents a dance, that's all they pay me!* to the delight of the Portuguese waiters. The company of old soldiers was the best in the world, Bowcott proclaimed, and what is more, Matt kept a good house: cockles on the bar on Sundays, always beef sandwiches to order, and it was a cool, clean bar with white-aproned waiters who knew their place, and a Victorian air to the china pumps with engraved fox-hunting scenes and vintage dirty postcards in apple pie order on the notice board. More important than anything else, except the beer, was the lavatory, the cleanest in the Algarve, a shaded white light, English paper and the wholesome smell of disinfectant and none of your damned scent. Eight pints down and you knew you were safe with a beef sandwich to build up your bowels when seafood got a bit too much. Bowcott, like an army, marched on his

stomach, and in the previous year, he prided himself that he'd found the only place on the continent where you could drink like an Englishman and not rue the day. He'd told this to Matt who'd made him write it in the visitor's book. Last year, the lavatory, the pub, the fresh cockles and delicious beer and the primed ale had made it the best holiday Bowcott had ever had and he'd come back with the same expectancy.

Fatal…

District Commissioner Jones, *Bwana Mc'wber* Jones, Jones the Gauleiter of Romford had made a cock-up in coming back.

'*For Chrissakes, the bogey's got his shooter out*!' the voice returned.

As did his mother's: 'Figs and pancakes, Bowcott?'

Yes, by God, he'd done a burster. No wonder he had a mouth like an acrobat's jockstrap. Perhaps he'd swallowed a fig stone? Perhaps it was the oysters? He must be alive with shellfish. Shake him and he'd rattle.

'*You will suffer, my boy. Yes, you will, you'll live to regret. Thank goodness Colenso isn't like you.*'

Colenso! That was it! Now he experienced total recall. Colenso, his moody nephew. Pertinent point! As well as his guts and the wogs, the Welshy-Welsh had knackered his holiday. Trust them!

The Bowcott Joneses had no children of their own. ('Lack of greens,' his mother said.) But he had a nephew, Colenso, whom he'd attempted to take under his wing whenever allowed, a small, thin, bespectacled, intellectual boy who had got into the wrong set at one of the lesser Welsh universities and emerged a rabid Welsh nationalist with Honours Welsh and an interest in his country that amounted to fetishism, in Bowcott's eyes. Despite all the gifts, the golf clubs, the fishing rods, the use of a salmon stretch, the wretch had become one of the interrupters of her Majesty's judges, a demonstrator, a non-road-tax payer who disappeared for weeks on end to summer schools and folk festivals where they ate, slept,

breathed and dreamed Welsh, a way of life and habit which Bowcott found incomprehensible and which irritated him more than he could say. In his aversion to this recently reborn element in his country, Bowcott was quite unreasonable. There was something sickly and introverted about it, he was sure. There was nothing for the people in it, just milk and honey for training college lecturers and the like, another bloody cottage industry from which the few profited and exploited the many. Moreover, it excluded Bowcott entirely, with his long-forgotten Welsh and what he called his international outlook. Fan, who was easy-going, said live and let live, but if it were possible, Bowcott would have been a hanging judge as far as Colenso's lot were concerned. A number of the young were quite taken with it, even protested a patriotism that made Bowcott into a kind of quisling and that set him off to boiling point. A quisling! After the scraps he's been in while in the Army, even going so far as to thump a paymaster and risking a court martial after one guest night.

'Welsh bastards,' the paymaster'd said. That was enough. Bowcott found a right cross that would have made Dancing Jim Driscoll cheer in his grave, and the paymaster had gone down in a heap in the corner by the ornamental-silver cupboard. The Adjutant had made enquiries and Bowcott had told him straight out.

'Can't have that, sir. It's not the "bastard" I object to, it's the slurring use of the adjective!'

'The Adj had told the Colonel, and the Colonel (who was from Abergavenny) had a good laugh about it as it happened and everything had been quite all right, even lent a certain kudos to Bowcott's reputation and the paymaster'd emerged as a shit anyway. Bowcott had struck a blow for his country, but it didn't register with Colenso one little bit. When he'd told him with a certain pride, Colenso's face had kept its intelligent, precious, rabbit look, and then he'd gone off and married a girl who was even more immersed in the Welsh business. They were like a pair of folkweave Ghandis

together, often spoke Welsh in front of him, and brought him to the boil more quickly than if they'd taken drugs in public. All through the Investiture (to which, naturally, he'd been invited and now kept his red, ornamental chair in the hall) he'd been on the lookout for violence, but the fact that Colenso's lot weren't violent made him dislike them all the more. Roots versus roots… It was a Welsh conundrum.

But to meet it here in Portugal! That was it, he'd gone into the tavern to find that Matt had left, packed up and gone to Ibiza. A youth stood in his place, a dirty, bearded, London wide boy.

'Trouble wiv the Missus, so he scarpered.'

'Scarpered?'

'I bought him out February.'

Matt gone… The place was no longer the same. The china beer pumps with their engraved fox-hunting scenes, exact replicas of a pair in the cocktail bar of the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi, were missing, so were the comic postcards, the cheery publican's greetings cards from home, the little saucers with crisps and olives in them, even the waiters' crisp white aprons. Where there had been a jar of the precious beef sandwiches, now there was a machine for dispensing salted peanuts, and, as soon as he found out, in the best lavatory in the Algarve, there was now a contraceptive slot machine and a notice by the management proclaiming, 'This gum may taste a little rubbery'. Not graffiti; by the management!

Worse still, there was Hair in the bar, by which Bowcott meant, the young. Previously, it had been the middle-aged who had congregated there, giving the place the atmosphere of a cheerful, senior officers' mess. But now girls in hot pants and semi-naked boys, looking like aborigines in Bermuda shorts, draped themselves about the place and the girls. There was not a soul in there his own age.

'What'll it be then, Chief?'

'A pint,' Bowcott said, fragile suddenly.

'Sagres?' the new proprietor said, referring to the local beer.

'Anything else?'

'I keep a few Guinesses for the old boys.'

The old boys… For some reason, the first phrase that came into Bowcott's mind was a Welsh one, *Bechgyn y Bont*, one of the few he knew. Translated, it meant 'Boys of the bridge', referring to a group of old soldiers from his home town, survivors of near-decimated regiments who had congregated together after the First War. They met once a month, growing older over the years, finally attending each other's funerals until they were virtually non-existent. Each of the boys of the bridge had a touching habit of leaving a tenner in their wills, a tenner 'for behind the bar', when the survivors would raise a number of solemn pints in memory of the departed. But the time had come when they could not exhaust the tenner and the change was stuffed into a charity box. In the end, the change exceeded the money spent. Farewell the Bechgyn y Bont.

Now Bowcott felt like one of them, and once again, seemed to hear the Last Post sounding in his ears.

'I'll have a large scotch,' he said in his most cultivated voice.

'Right you are, guv. Old Matt had all the big spenders here, eh?'

The big spenders… Bowcott sat dismally upon a stool. No one paid any attention to him. A young couple, draped around each other at the end of the bar, changed hands soulfully. Why they had to feel themselves in public, Bowcott would never know.

'Drop of splash, mate?'

Mate… But he nodded. It looked like a morning on the scotch, a morning of silent reverie seated at the corner of the bar. He felt like a colonial planter, recently returned home and completely out of things. But it was not in his nature to sit maudlin anywhere, and he soon struck up a conversation with the new proprietor, only to find there was another blow to the stomach.

'I thought you was Welsh.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Iacky Da, I gotta few Taffees comin' here.'

Bowcott did not reply.

But he was to have no peace. Like a light-skinned negro passing as white, he had been spotted, and when he had downed another scotch in stony silence, a newcomer entered the bar, nodded at the proprietor who promptly sidled up to Bowcott and made the unwanted introduction.

'Major Bowcott Jones,' Bowcott said grimly.

The newcomer was young, with dark, curly hair, a pale, nondescript face, and a slight stoop, unmistakeably Welsh.

'It's hardly possible, but I don't suppose you're related to…'

Colenso, of course. Anything was always possible with bloody relatives! But to come a thousand miles to Portugal to have the dismembered limb of the family regurgitated. Bowcott could not supress a dismal nod.

'I have a very great admiration for him,' the young man said.

Bowcott would have said, 'Good chap!' not, 'a very great admiration.' It sounded so fawning.

'Why?' Bowcott said sharply. His temper had risen immediately.

'His general militancy.'

'On whose behalf?'

'Why, the Welsh people.'

'He's never met any of 'em,' Bowcott said unreasonably. 'But for Christ's sake, let's not go into it, I'm on holiday.' He felt so annoyed at this extraordinarily unlucky encounter that he was in danger of letting himself go. Questions of Welsh nationalism affected him in the same way as a wholly English counterpart might be similarly provoked by encounters with advocates of illegitimate birth, CND, or permissive television. He cut short the conversation as soon as he could.

'Young man, if you don't mind… Look here, why don't you have a drink?'

'No, thank you,' the young man said. He turned away, but did not go.

Bowcott sighed. It was absurd to be standing in a Portuguese bar in the presence of obvious riff-raff, boiling about Aberystwyth University and its environs. He was on holiday, and now it was as if two worlds had collided in one person, and back his thoughts went like tired homing geese to the perennial open sore – Wales. It was a country of permanent ills, four countries rolled into one, and if you didn't get away from it now and again, you choked in the backbiting and rancour. Thanks God he was a South Walian anyway. Thank God for coal and the Marquis of Bute. And a pox on the Ychafi Welsh and their road sign campaigns and eternal bleating.

He ordered another whisky and, by habit, asked for the morning paper, but when it came, it was in Portuguese.

'Haven't you got the *Express*?'

But they had not, and the young man smiled, Bowcott thought. He could not see, but he was sure he was smiling, smiling a young Welsh smile, and it was dark and foreboding, Bowcott was sure. Unreason leads to unreason, misunderstanding to further misunderstanding. Where prejudices foster, rancour is rife, and Bowcott now felt a wave of self-pity as he recalled that, sitting on this very stool the previous year, he'd felt like a proconsul. He and Matt had gone shark fishing with a drunken Dutchman, and with the wind in their faces, the rolling Biscayan swell beneath them off St Vincent, they had drunk whisky and eaten meat and recaptured a piratical feeling of freedom that had lasted a year. They'd brought in an ebony black Mako shark, its jaws snapping as they gaffed it, and later proudly laid it on the beach where the peasants came to inspect the day's catch. Bowcott had insisted on its being given away for fertilizer and then they'd drunk late into the night, wearing cowboy shirts and cutting slices of dried cod with sheath knives. It was a holiday of holidays, a reversion to primal living that

had given him a new image of himself as an international outdoorsman.

All to crumble if he didn't shake off this Welsh depression. The young man had moved to another corner of the bar so Bowcott finished his drink, and with a curt nod to the proprietor, wandered out into the street where he bumped into an acquaintance of the year before.

'Jake!'

'Bowcott!'

'My God, that place has gone off since Matt left.'

'How long are you over for? When are you going back?'

They soon found another bar. Jake was large, sad and dyspeptic, a remittance man, odd-jobbing for the tour operators, an ex-professional wrestler with a villainous broken nose but with the temperament of an obliging spaniel, an expert hanger-on. He had gone native in Singapore when the Japs got in, had stayed out of captivity, a valuable workhorse worth hiding. But now he was ulcerated and hungry, occasionally delivering new cars from Lisbon, picking up what he could here and there. But an old soldier down on his luck could not wish for better company than Bowcott.

'How've you been?'

'So, so…'

'You don't say?'

'Place has got too full of people from home. Got very tight, it has. You haven't eaten by any chance, have you?'

Jake wanted a meal. Nothing but the best then. Jake had been around, that was the cardinal point.

'You had to get around,' Bowcott said happily, the moment they seated themselves in a restaurant.

'All over,' Jake said. 'All over.'

They ate through the afternoon and into the early evening. They ate oysters and clams, the fruits of the sea, and then gorged themselves on spiced meats and oiled salads. And they had to have a swallow with it, didn't they? And after

the wine, the brandy – a 'tween course pick-me-up – they started on the fruit and figs. Bowcott had a passion for figs, as Jake had for *Crêpes Suzette*, so that they did themselves proud, 'going round the buoy twice' whenever there was a course or a glass that took their fancy. By the time they lit cigars, Bowcott had shaken off his depression. Once you got a drop inside you, the world was a different place, no matter whether the drop included the anti-Romford gins, the War Memorial beers, the anti-Welsh whiskies, or the old soldier's litres, it was all a drop taken, and by the evening, he felt he just could not leave without a final pint at the English Tavern. Just to show there were no hard feelings. Jake did not mind, had looked wistfully at the tip which Bowcott left in the restaurant, but no matter, they'd have a chaser at the bar and drink to the vanished Matt.

But when they got there, the tourists had given way to the locals, including a uniformed Army picket from the fort. The proprietor had his eye on the winter custom and encouraged the locals whereas Matt had closed in the winter, but a whisky drinker was a whisky drinker, and he greeted them cordially. Bowcott responded with a nod, at the same time aware of a certain tension in the air. Was it sixth sense that warned him of an atmosphere amongst the Portuguese? Jake and he were the only two foreign customers and it seemed as if people had stopped talking when they entered. Bowcott gave Jake a wink, lowered his District Commissioner's ear and raised Special Agent Bowcott's other antennae. He ordered two whiskies and chasers, sized up the bar.

The army patrol were standing uneasily in the corner, their glasses empty, but on the other side of the room by the panelled mantelpiece, there sat a large muscular young man with the stump of an arm protruding from his sports shirt. He was dark and thick-necked with an insolent flushed expression that separated him from the two nervous youths who were drinking with him. He wore his hair short, and from the way he put his good arm to the side of his head,

seemed to have suffered a head injury as well. He kept tapping his head with his fist, a sombre demonstration indicating that there might be something inside which had gone wrong, and which he could not forget. But for the stump of his arm, his heavy, dark face might have protruded from the back row of a Welsh pack, Bowcott thought. It was absurd, but many of the larger Portuguese looked South Walian. They had the same quality of brooding, not quite surliness, but an air of threat. There were even waiters in the hotel with aggrieved Tonypandy walks, hacking 'dust' coughs, and bad feet. But here no one spoke. There was definitely an imposed silence, but the bar was so small, it was impossible to say anything without being overheard. Insanely, Bowcott wished he could mutter a few words in Welsh to Jake because no one else would have understood. The fixed glances of the army patrol in the corner left him in no doubt that their arrival was an embarrassment. There were so many things that it was better the tourist did not see.

The proprietor switched on the taped music and an ancient pop number came up loudly.

'*Quizas! Quizas! Quizas!*'

The atmosphere seemed to lighten momentarily.

'*A situarzione*?' Bowcott whispered inquisitively.

Jake shook his head nervously as if to compel Bowcott to say no more.

But Bowcott was curious.

'Punch-up, d'you think?'

Jake leaned forward and whispered with a convict's side-of-the-mouth grimace.

'The guy with one arm's loco.'

'Eh?'

'Mozambique.'

'What?'

'Caught one in the head. Bullet. I shouldn't say anything if I were you. Now he breaks up bars for a living.'

Bowcott looked around him with a distinct unease, and

suddenly, the afflicted Portuguese rose unsteadily and wandered over to Bowcott who rose instinctively.

'Engleesch peoples very good peoples,' the Portuguese said.

His eyes were troubled, perhaps unfocused. His breath was sour. He was very drunk and swayed once more, 'Naice peoples, no?'

'Well,' Bowcott said. It seemed a little inappropriate to insist on '*Pays de Galles*' as he often did.

The Portuguese put his only arm on Bowcott's shoulder and leant heavily upon him. He spoke with difficulty.

'Engleesch peoples fair peoples,' he nodded and smiled with all the air of definitive scholarship of an extremely drunken man.

Across the bar, the proprietor and the soldiers were tense, but Bowcott put his arm around the young man, gulping as his eyes met the obscene stump of the amputated arm. The flesh was red and puckered and strangely disturbing, a real wound beside all those phoney memorials.

'*Soldado*?' Bowcott said.

'Ye…s,' the young man gave a bitter smile.

Bowcott puffed out his chest.

'You'd better have a drink with me,' he said in a fatherly voice. 'Beer?'

The young man nodded, but the proprietor shook his head nervously. Bowcott ignored him. He knew he had skills with drunks.

'Two beers, *pash favor*?'

'I don't think…' the proprietor began to say.

'Nonsense!' said Bowcott. 'If two old soldiers can't have a drink together, what's the world coming to?' He was pleased he said that. A Buggins would have run out of the bar at the first sign of trouble. Even Jake was sitting there like a Methodist Sunday School superintendent.

The Portuguese lurched dangerously against Bowcott. The stump of his arm was barely concealed under the short-sleeved sport shirt.

'Steady the Buffs!' Bowcott said. He gave a friendly man-to-man wink, but it did not register.

The Portuguese looked into Bowcott's eyes.

'Me – crazy,' he said. It was a phrase he seemed to have learned to say, apologetically like a beggar's set piece.

The proprieter put the beers on the bar. The patrol had not moved and the sergeant held an empty glass in his hand like a weapon.

'We all have our off days,' Bowcott said, short of words suddenly.

The Portuguese nodded, deeply and mysteriously to himself, swayed again, then lurched from Bowcott's friendly arm and picked up the fresh beer glass defiantly, spilling half its contents as he raised his arm in a toast.

'A Che Guevara,' he said loudly with a sideways glance at the patrol. He said it with reverence, a name that meant something, that was dangerous to say, but would be said always, secretly and in the open, a name for such young men to conjure with.

But Bowcott sighed dismally, reverting to his earlier feeling of dismay. Politics again… The bastards were everywhere, excluding him from their enthusiasms, waving ideas like flags, but always beating a hollow drum as far as he was concerned. It had taken him fifty-six years of his life to know his way around and learn the ropes of living, so why should he want to change anything?

The patrol sergeant, older than the boy soldiers beside him, was corase faced and muscular, his leather shoulder-straps worn and comfortable, and the little gold wheel insignia on his beret was almost polished away with years of cleaning. He snapped a word of warning in Portuguese across the bar.

The young man spat on the floor.

'A Che Guevara,' he said again, raising the glass and spilling the remainder of his drink.

Two young Portuguese customers left hurriedly, a sweating

youth tucking his shirt into his trousers as he went out through the door without a look behind him.

In order to quieten the situation, Bowcott raised his glass.

'A *Pays de Galles*,' he said, clicking his heels to attention.

'No, *Che Guevara*,' the young man said. '*Che! Che! Che!*'

It was a tense moment.

A policeman appeared in the doorway. The flap of his holster was unbottened. He was a small, wizened, untidy policeman with the stub of an unlit cheroot stuck to his lower lip. His blue-grey uniform was shabby and his collar was unbuttoned below a podgy, unhealthy face. He drew his revolver apologetically like a tired male nurse producing a thermometer, but when the revolver was drawn and the safety catch removed, he beckoned at the young man and said one word.

'*Vivaldo*…'

The young man swayed uncertainly and turned towards him, putting down the empty beer glass. At that moment, seeing their chance, the patrol rushed the young man from the rear, the three soldiers, sergeant in the lead, coming around the corner of the bar like wing forwards. They knocked Vivaldo head first out into the street and as his head hit the cobblers below the doorstep, the policeman brought his boot down in a tired little kick that caused blood to spurt from Vivaldo's nose. But the damage was done by Vivaldo's head hitting the cobbles and he was unable to rise.

Across the street, a woman screamed.

Bowcott stared. The kick infuriated him. He drew himself up, brushed aside Jake who had risen to stop him, and marched to the doorstep, staring haughtily down into the face of the policeman.

'Look here,' he said importantly. 'There is no call to kick a man when he is down.'

It was then the proprietor called frantically.

'For Chrissakes, the bogey's got his shooter out!'

'Be quiet!' Bowcott snapped.

The policeman looked up at him confusedly. What business was it of his?

A sedan had driven up the street. At the wheel sat a large elderly man, deeply sunburnt behind dark glasses, the elbow of his light grey suit casually resting in the opened window. He lifted his arm slowly, a gold watch bracelet glistening then disappearing behind his shirt cuff. He seemed completely relaxed but as if by prearranged signal, the soldiers now picked up the semi-conscious body of Vivaldo and dragged him across to the car, bundling him into the rear seat and closing the door. The man nodded and drove away.

For a moment Bowcott was tempted to run after the car, but the proprietor had joined him.

'Come inside!'

'I demand to know where they are taking him.'

'That's his old man, you git.'

'What?'

'Come in before the bogey gets shirty.'

Bowcott hesitated. There had been no mistaking that kick in the face.

'Never interrupt the bastards when they've got their shooters out. If you was in the Army, you ought to know that.'

Bowcott turned away confusedly. The soldiers were dusting themselves down in the gutter and the policeman lit his cheroot. Bowcott's interruption had been brave and meaningless, like a donkey braying in the dark.

'That Vivaldo,' the proprietor explained. 'The moment he's got a load on, it's Che Guevara day and bloody night.'

'But…'

Course, you can't normally do that in Portugal, but the joke is, see, his old man's in the police himself. So they come and get him once a month.'

'You mean, his father…'

'In the Chevrolet. Full up to here wiv him, he is. Must be.'

'You mean, they're doing his father a favour?'

The proprietor nodded.

'But what about the kick?'

'I 'spect the bogey's full up to here wiv him too.'

Bowcott could hardly believe it. But it was a village scandal and a village story into which other worlds had intruded, other worlds, alien ideas. The last thing Bowcott remembered before he mooched back to the hotel, were the Portuguese women drawing their black shawls over their heads as they came out into the street to discuss the matter, their sharp tongues cawing away like crows. He remembered enough to know that everybody's sympathies were with the father. An ordinary Portuguese would, of course, have been locked up at the mention of Che Guevara, but Vivaldo apparently had connections.

'Influence,' Bowcott thought moodily. When he got down to it, the whole bloody world was like Glamorgan.

But how much had he understood? Had he behaved ridiculously again? He found his wallet finally, stuffed for safety on top of the Westinghouse air conditioner, then examined Lucas Thomas' handwriting on the medicine bottle, '*Two x 5m spoonfuls to be taken four times a day*'.

'Good old Lucas,' he said, forgetting his earlier animosity. He had a sudden intolerable nostalgia for grey skies, grey faces, grey terraced streets, the bustling conviviality of teeming football grounds and men's four-ale bars, and as if to salute them, he suddenly removed the cork from the medicine bottle, upended it, and drank copiously from the neck. He reverted to the vernacular finally, grateful for its protection. Bowels was buggers of things when you came to think of it. It was as if there was a particular danger that this slightest disturbance might make you think.

And he was spared nothing.

'Emma… Emma…' the voices began outside, floating up from the swimming pool as the Romford lot began to colonise it. '*Even if it is abroad, you can't run around without your nix*.'

He belched. There were days when it seemed as if his stomach was pressing against his eyeballs, and the way he now felt, it had all the signs of a real clogger. Lucas would eventually have to get the arrowroot out again, and Fan would probably enjoy herself for a day or two, mostly on her own.