



ANTHONY BURGESS
EARTHLY POWERS




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Anthony Burgess

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To Liana

It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday, and I was in bed with my catamite when A announced that the archbishop had come to see me.

“Very good, Ali,” I quavered in Spanish through the closed door of the master bedroom. “Take him into the bar. Give him a drink.”

“*Hay dos. Su capellán también.*”

“Very good, Ali. Give his chaplain a drink also.”

I retired twelve years ago from the profession of novelist. Nevertheless you will be constrained to consider, if you know my work at all and take the trouble now to reread that first sentence, that I have lost none of my old cunning in the contrivance of what is known as an arresting opening. But there is really nothing of contrivance about it. Actuality sometimes plays into the hands of art. That I was eighty-one I could hardly doubt: congratulatory cables had been rubbing it in all through the forenoon. Geoffrey, who was already pulling on his overtight summer slacks, was, I supposed, my Ganymede and male lover as well as my secretary. The Spanish word ‘*arzobispo*’ certainly means archbishop. The time was something after four o’clock on a Maltese June day—the twenty-third, to be exact—and to spare the truly interested the trouble of consulting *Who’s Who*.

Geoffrey sweated too much and was running to fat (why does one say *running*? Geoffrey never ran). The living, I supposed, was too easy for a boy of thirty-five. Well, the time for our separation could not in the nature of things, be much longer delayed. Geoffrey would not be pleased when he attended the reading of my will. “The old bitch, my dear, and all I did for him.” I would do for him too, though posthumously, posthumously.

I lay a little while, naked, mottled, sallow, emaciated, smoking a cigarette that should have been postcoital but was not. Geoffrey put on his sandals puffing, creasing his stomach into three bunches of fat, and then his flowery coatshirt. Finally he hid himself behind his sunglasses, which were of the insolent kind whose convexities flash metallic mirrors at the world. I observed my eighty-one-year-old face and neck quite clearly in them: the famous ancient grimness of one who had experienced life very keenly, the unfleshed tendons like cables, the anatomy of the jaws, the Fribourg and Treyer cigarette in its Dunhill holder relating me to an era when smoking had been an act to be performed with elegance. I looked without rancor on the double image while Geoffrey said: “I wonder what his archbishopship will be after. Perhaps he’s delivering a bull of excommunication. In a gaudy gift wrapper, of course.”

“Sixty years too late,” I said. I handed Geoffrey the half-smoked cigarette to stub out in one of the onyx ashtrays, and I noticed how he begrudged even that small service. I got out of bed, naked, mottled, sallow, emaciated. My summer slacks were, following nominal propriety, far from tight. The shirt of begonias and orchids was ridiculous on a man of my age, but I had long drawn the fangs of Geoffrey’s sneers by saying: “Dear boy, I must habituate myself to the prospect of reverential infloration.” That phrase dated back to 1915. I had heard it in Lamb House, Rye, but it was less *echt* Henry James than Henry James mocking *echt* Meredith. He was remembering 1909 and some lady sending Meredith too many flowers. “Reverential infloration, ho ho ho,” James had mocked, rolling his eyes at mock mirth.

“The felicitations of the *faithful*, then.”

I did not care at all for the aspirated stress Geoffrey laid on the word. It connoted sex and his own shameless infidelities; it was a word I had once used to him weeping; it carried for me a tradition of moral seriousness that was no more than a camp joke to Geoffrey’s generation.

“The *faithful*,” I aspirated back, “are not supposed to read my books. Not here, on Saint Paul’s holy island. Here I am immoral and anarchic and agnostic and rational. I think I can guess what the archbishop wants. And he wants it precisely because I am all of those things.”

“Clever old devil, aren’t you?” His mirrors caught golden stone from the Triq al-Kbira, meaning Street the Big or Main Street, outside the open casement.

I said, “There is much neglected correspondence down below in what you call your office. Sickened by your sloth, I took it upon myself to open a letter or two, hot from the hands of the mailman. One of them bore a Vatican stamp.”

“Ah, fuck you,” Geoffrey smiled, or seemed to: I could not of course see his eyes. Then he mocked my slight lisp: “Thickened by your sloth.” Then he said “Fuck you” again, this time sulkily.

“I think,” I said, hearing the senile dry wavering and hating it, “I’d better sleep alone in future. It would be seemly at my age.”

“Facing facts at last, dear?”

“Why”—I trembled at the big blue wall mirror, brushing back my scant strands—“do you make those things sound mean and dirty? Warmth. Comfort. Love. Are those dirty words? Love, love. Is that dirty?”

“Matters of the *heart*,” Geoffrey said, seeming to smile again. “We must watch that rather mature pump, must we not? Very well. Each of us sleeps in his sundered bed. And if you cry out in the night, who will hear you?”

Wer, wenn ich schreie... Who had said or written that? Of course, poor great dead Rilke. He had cried out my presence in a low beershop in Trieste, not far from the Aquarium. The tears had flowed most of all from his nose, and he had wiped his nose on his sleeve. “You have always managed to sleep soundly enough at my laboring side,” I said. “Soundly enough not to be sensible even of the sharp prodding of my finger.” And then, quavering shamefully: “Faithful, faithful.” I was ready to weep again, the word was so loaded. I remembered poor Winston Churchill, who, at about my present age, would weep over words like *greatness*. It was called emotional lability, a disease of the senile.

Geoffrey did not mouth a smile now, nor set his jaw in weak truculence. The lower part of his face showed a sort of compassion, the upper the twin and broken me. *Poor old bugger*, he would be saying to himself and, later perhaps, to some friend or toady in the bar of the Corinthia Palace Hotel, *poor senile decrepit lonely old impotent sod*. To me, with kind briskness: “Come, dear. Your fly is properly fastened. Good.”

“It would not show. Not inflorated as I am.”

“Splendid. Let us then put on the mask of distinguished immoral author. His archbishopship awaits. And he opened the heavy door which led straight into the airy upper salon. At my age I could, can, take any fierce amount of light and heat, and both these properties of the South roared in, like a Rossini finale in stereophony, from the open and unshuttered casements. To the right were the housetops and the gaudy washing of Lija, a passing bus, quarrelling children; to the left, beyond crystal and statuary and the upper terrace, the hiss and pump hum came up of the irrigation of my orange and lemon trees. In other words, I heard life going on, and it was a comfort. We trod cool marble, heavy white bear fur, marble, fur, marble. Over there was the William Foster harpsichord, which I had bought for my former friend and secretary, Ralph, faithless, some of its middle strings broken one night in a drunken

tantrum by Geoffrey. On the walls were paintings by my great contemporaries: now fabulous valuable but all acquired cheap when, though still young, I had emerged from struggle. There were cases showing off jade, ivory, glass, metal *bibelots* or *objets d'art*. How the French terms, admitting the triviality, somehow cleansed them of it. The tangible fruits of success. The real fight, the struggle with form and expression, unwon.

Oh, my God—the *real* fight? I was thinking like an author, not like a human, though senile, being. *And* though conquering language mattered. As if, at the end of it all, there were anything more important than clichés. Faithful. You have failed to be faithful. You have lapsed, or fallen, into infidelity. I believe that a man should be faithful to his beliefs. O come all ye faithful. That could still evoke tearful nostalgia at Christmas. The reproduction in my father's surgery of that anecdotal horror—no, who was I to say it was a horror?: the wide-eyed soldier at his post while Pompeii fell. Faithful unto death. The felicitations of the *faithful*, then. The world of the homosexual has a complex language, brittle yet sometimes excruciatingly precise, fashioned out of the clichés of the other world. So, *cher maître*, these are the tangible fruits of your success.

Geoffrey shuffled into step with me, mockingly, as if to emphasize his, my dear, role of aide de *camp*. Side by side, tread by tread, in comic neatness, we descended the first marble flight. We arrived at a spacious landing with a Jacobean cupboard in which exquisite glassware hid—for use, dear, for actual imbibing out of—and an eighteenth-century chess table permanently set with men of Mexican obsidian (for show only, dear—his *playing* days are done), then turned right to engage the final marbled cataract. I looked at the gilt Maltese clock on the wall of the stairwell. It said nearly three.

“Nobody's come to repair it,” I said, hearing my petulance. “It's been three days now. Not, of course, that it really matters.”

We were three steps from the bottom. Geoffrey tapped the clock as if it were a barometer, then viciously mimed a punch at it.

“Bloody place,” he said. “I loathe and detest the bloody place.”

“Give it time, Geoffrey.”

“We could have gone somewhere else. There are other islands if it's islands you bloody want.”

“Later,” I said. “We have visitors.”

“We could bloody well have stayed in Tangier. We could have got the better of the bastards.”

“We? It was you, Geoffrey, who were in trouble, not I.”

“You could have damned well done something. Faithful. Don't use that bloody word *faithful* to me.”

“I did do something. I took you away from Tangier.”

“Why to this bloody place? Bloody priests and police working hand in bloody hand.”

“There are two *bloody priests* waiting to see us. Moderate your tone.”

“If you want to die here I bloody well don't.”

“A man has to die somewhere, Geoffrey. Malta seems to me a reasonable kind of compromise.”

“Why can't you die in bloody London?”

“Taxes, Geoffrey. Estate duty. Climate.”

“God blast and bloody well damn this bloody stinking place.”

I minced the three treads down to the hall, and he followed, damning and bloodying now merely under his breath. Three steps away, on a silver salver, blessed by a Chinese bowl full of flowers of the season, lay a fresh batch of felicitations brought by Cable and Wireless motorcyclists. The bar was across the hall, to the right, between the wreck of an office where Geoffrey neglected his secretarial work and my own fussily neat study. On the wall between the bar and the study was the George Rouault—a scrawled ugly ballerina, impatient thick black strokes and bitter washes. In Paris that time

Maynard Keynes had hotly recommended that I buy it. He had known all about markets.

His Grace was quite at his ease in the bar. I had expected to find him sitting fidgeting at one of the tables with an untouched orange squash before him, but here he was perched at the counter on a favorite leather stool, neat little foot on the rail, neat little fat hand holding what looked like a neat scotch. He was talking loudly and affably with Ali—who, white-coated, stood behind as bartender—in, to my astonishment, Ali's own language. Was this a gift of the Pentecostal Paraclete? Then I remembered that Maltese and Moghrabi Arabic were sister dialects. His Grace began to climb down from his stool when he saw me, smiling and greeting in English: "To meet you at last, Mr. Toomey. A privilege and a pleasure. I know I speak for the whole community when I wish you, as I do now, very many happy returns."

A swarthy young man in a plainer clerical habit than his superior's shouted from the far corner "Happy birthday, sir. It is an honor to wish it to you in person." The bar was small and there was no need to shout, but some of the Maltese use an abnormally high voice level even when whispering. He had been looking at my framed photographs on the walls, all of me with various of the great Chaplin in Los Angeles, Thomas Mann in Princeton, Gertrude Lawrence at the close of one of my London runs, H. G. Wells (with, of course, Odette Keun) at Lou Pidou, Ernest Hemingway on the Plover off Key West. There were also framed posters of in stage successes—*He Paid His Way*, *The Gods in the Garden*, *Oedipus Higgins*, *Break Break Break*, others. Both clerics cheerfully raised their glasses at me. Then His Grace put his glass on the counter and ambled toward me somewhat slyly, his right hand raised horizontally at ring-kissing level. I shook it.

"My chaplain, Father Azzopardi."

"My secretary, Geoffrey Enright."

The archbishop was a few years younger than myself, evidently vigorous though very plump; being plump, not much lined or wrinkled. We eyed each other with friendly wariness, opposed in trade but united in our generation. I noted, in my frivolous way, that we all made up a reasonable poker hand with two pairs, Ali discarded. I said to Ali in Spanish: "Gin and tonic. Then you can go."

His Grace sat now at one of the three tables, draining his glass first then rocking it humorously in his hand. He was very much at home. This was, after all, his archdiocese.

I said, "It's perhaps, after all, too early for drinks. Would you like tea?"

"Oh yes," the chaplain cried, turning with eagerness from myself and Mae West outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, "tea would be very nice."

"Drinks," pronounced the archbishop. And he told Ali, in Maltese-Moghrabi, to give him the same again. Then, he seemed to say, Ali could go. "This lovely house," he said. "These lovely gardens and orchard. I have visited here often. In the time of Sir Edward Hubert Canning. In the time of the late Mrs. Tagliaferro. Father Azzopardi, I know, would be very delighted to be shown all around or about everything, by Mr... by your young friend here with the mirrors on his eyes. The young, is it not, Mr. Toomey? These young people. The house was, this you may not know or perhaps may know, it was built in 1798 when Bonaparte invaded. He sent the Knights away. He tried to restrict or constrict the powers of the clergy." His Grace chuckled grimly. "He did not succeed. The Maltese people would not

have it. There were incidents. There were deaths.”

I took my gin and tonic from Ali and brought it to the table. I sat down opposite the archbishop, who had already been served with a large neat Claymore. “Well,” I said to Geoffrey, “you have your instructions. Show his ah reverence around the house and gardens. Give him tea.”

Father Azzopardi drained his glass of whatever it was with nervous haste and began to cough. Geoffrey banged him on the back with excessive energy, saying at each stroke of his fist, “Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.”

“Geoffrey,” I said sharply, “that is not funny.”

Geoffrey put out his tongue and led coughing Father Azzopardi off. His Grace made one final Semitic joke at Ali, who too, laughing, went off. “A good boy,” His Grace said, “one can see that. These your people,” he added, nodding toward Geoffrey’s voice that could be heard, full of aspirated stresses moving toward green and sunlight. And then: “You play bridge here, I should think. A room pleasantly appointed for the playing of bridge,” his eyes on the shelves full of bottles. “A harmless and civilized pastime.” He raised his fat hand in what seemed to be both a blessing on the game and a gesture of regret that he could not accept, ever, an invitation to come and play. “I played. I play no longer. I have far too much work. His late Holiness too played. And then he too had far too much work. This you will know.” His modest smile was meant, I assumed, to diminish the comparison.

So, as I had been foretold in that Vatican letter, the visit was to be about His late Holiness. I said, “When Carlo was raised so high, his bridge-playing days were already over. Far too much work, as you say, as he said. But he had been a superb player—very clever and fierce. Like Mrs. Battle, you know.”

His Grace had not heard of the lady. “Ah yes, I can believe that. Clever and fierce. But also human, is it humane? Perhaps both. But also a saint.” He looked at me with small unwilling awe. Carlo, I had said.

I was ready to joke about there being no bridge saints, but that would have been cheap and unworthy. Instead, I said, “I know of the proposal, naturally. I gather there is still much to be done.”

His Grace waved the hand that was not holding his drink. “I speak, of course, of course—”

“Proleptically?”

“You are a master of the language, Mr. Toomey. It will, I fear, be always a foreign language to me. The language of the Protestant, if you will forgive me. That you are a master is well known. I have little time, of course, for reading. I have been often told that you are a master of the English language.”

“Something,” I said, “that most Maltese must be content to be told. Those interested, I mean. They are forbidden to find out for themselves.”

“Oh, one or two of your books are permitted. This I know. But our people must be protected, Mr. Toomey. But I think that soon our censorship may be a little bit relaxed. There is a new spirit abroad, home as well, aha. Already you may now buy the works freely of the atheist Monsieur Voltaire. French, too.”

“Deist, not atheist.” I knew what he was here for, but I decided to use pretended ignorance to get my point in. “Archbishop,” I said, “I take it you are not here in any shall I say pastoral capacity? You will know, I think, that I was born in the faith. But I propose to die out of it. I have lived long enough out of it. I ought to make my position absolutely clear.” And yet I gulped on that *faith*.

“You propose,” he said cheerfully. “Man proposes.” And then: “No no no, oh no. One thing I have learned, we are all learning, His late Holiness was, aha, very clever and fierce in teaching us all, one thing is that there are many ways to salvation. But let me put it this way to you, Mr. Toomey. You know the Church. Whatever you are now, you are not a Protestant. Certain doctrines, words, terms—their meaning have meaning for you. I am right, I think.”

“Permit me to give you more whisky,” I said, taking his glass and getting up, stiff, an old man. “Allow me to offer you a cigar. Or a cigarette.”

“A lethal action, smoking,” he said without irony. “Smoking makes the life shorter. Just a little drop then.” I took a cigarette for myself from the Florentine leather-bound box on the counter. There was also a huge wooden bowl from Central Africa full of matchbooks, trophies of the world’s airlines and hotels. I had toyed once with the notion of a travel book arranged on the aleatory taking out matchbooks from this bowl, rather like filthy Norman Douglas’s autobiography based on the random selection of visiting cards. It had come to nothing. There is sense, however, in keeping a bowl full of such trophies: there are addresses and telephone numbers there, as well as a palpable record of travel helpful to an old man’s memory. I lighted my cigarette with a match from La Grande Scene, restaurant at the top of the Kennedy Centre in Washington, 833-8870. I could not for the life of me remember having been there. I puffed and shortened my life. Then I gave His Grace his whisky. He took it without thanks, a kind of intimacy. He said, as I sat down again: “The word *miracle*, for example.” He looked at me sharply and brightly.

“Ah, that. Yes, well, I received a letter, a note rather, from my old bridge. playing acquaintance with Monsignor O’Shaughnessy.”

“Ah, the bridge I did not know about. Interesting.”

“He mentioned the virtues of the personal approach. I see his point. Some things do not go well on paper. For all that, they seem to be building up a vast dossier of saintly evidence. A piece of evidence from a known apostate and self-proclaimed rationalist and agnostic would be of far greater value than the testimony of some superstitious old peasant woman in black. This is what Monsignor O’Shaughnessy’s note seemed to imply.”

His Grace swayed rather gracefully on his bottom, flashing his rings. “To me,” he said, “he spoke when I was in Rome. It is strange, Mr. Toomey, you must admit it, it is even bizarre, if that is the word yourself, I mean. I mean a man who has rejected God—that is what they would say in the old days, now we are more careful—and yet had such close contacts with—I mean, you could write a book, is not that true?”

“About Carlo? Ah, Your Grace, how do you know I haven’t? In any case, it would never get into Malta, would it—a book by Kenneth Marchal Toomey about the late Pope. It would be bound to be well received, not hagiography.”

“Monsignor O’Shaughnessy mentioned to me that you have already written some little thing. You wrote it while he was still alive. Before he became what he at last became.”

“I wrote a certain short story,” I said. “About a priest who—Look, my Lord Archbishop, you can read the story for yourself. It’s in my three volumes of collected stories. My secretary could hunt you out a copy.”

He looked at me. Was there bitterness there, was there shame? One should never say that one had no time for reading. It meant, with him, no time for my kind of irreligious trash. But there were times when even a great cleric should be prepared to do his homework. “Monsignor O’Shaughnessy,” he mumbled in a very un-Maltese manner, “telephoned to me yesterday, saying that he had read somewhere that it was your birthday today. That it was a good day for me to come. There was some article on you, he said, in an English newspaper.”

“Last Sunday’s *Observer*. The article has not, officially speaking, been read by anyone in Malta. The reverse page carried a large article, copiously illustrated, on ladies’ swimwear. The censors at Luqa Airport cut it out. They thus also cut out the little birthday article on myself. I received an uncensored copy through the British High Commission. In the bag, as they put it.”

“Yes yes, I see. But our people must be protected. But some of these men with their scissors at the airport are not of the most educated. However, there it is.”

“While we’re on the subject, I may as well tell you that the General Post Office in Valletta have, after some trouble, kindly allowed me to have a copy of the poems of Thomas Campion that was sent to me a limited edition of some value. They said that they had at last discovered that Thomas Campion was a great English martyr, so it must be all right.”

“Good, that is good, then.”

“No, not good. The great English martyr was Edmund, not Thomas. Thomas Campion wrote some rather dirty little songs. Clean songs too, of course, but some quite erotic.”

He nodded and nodded, not displeased. Something or other, my agnostic depravity probably, was confirmed from my own mouth. He seemed unabashed at his ignorance of English martyrology.

“Well, now, that is very interesting. But it is the other thing we are concerned about.” He was right about the conversational economy of the confessional against the author’s tendency to divagate. “And, of course, to wish you a happy birthday yet again.” He toasted me, smiling plumply. Absent-mindedly I toasted myself.

“Monsignor O’Shaughnessy says that you are said to have said in some interview or somewhere about there not being any doubt of the miracle. That you witnessed it. And so I am to offer you every facility to set down, to write, to make some little—”

“Deposition?”

He played an invisible concertina for two seconds. “Your mastery of the language. Canonization. Miracles. It is the usual thing. Your Thomas More, man of all seasons. Joan of Arc.”

“In what way are you to offer me *every facility*? I have paper, a pen, a sort of memory. Ah, I think I know what is meant. I am not to put off doing it. I am to be prodded. The saint-making is somewhat urgent.”

“No no no no, you are to take your time.”

I smiled at him, seeing my jawed grimace in the fine old mirror over the bar, a genuine antique that advertised Sullivan’s Whiskey. “So I, who don’t believe in saints, am involved in the making of a saint. Very piquant. Bizarre, to use your own term.”

“It is surely only a matter of the fact. It is not even a matter of you using the word *miracle*. It is a matter of you saying that you saw something that could not by normal means be explained.” He seemed to be growing bored already with his assignment, but suddenly a spark of professional concern animated his brown droll eyes. “And yet surely *miracle* is the only word for what is seen clearly to be happening but cannot be explained except except—”

“—As the intervention of some force unknown to common sense or to science.”

“Yes yes, you will admit that?”

“Not altogether. The world was once all miracle. Then everything started to be explained. Everything will be explained in time. It’s just a matter of waiting.”

“But this. It was in a hospital somewhere, was it not? And the doctors had despaired of the life of whoever it was? Yes?”

“It happened a long time ago,” I said. “And I don’t know whether you, Your Grace, would understand this, but writers of fiction often have difficulty in deciding between what really happened and what they imagine as having happened. That is why, in my sad trade, we can never be really devout or pious. We lie for a living. This, as you can imagine, makes us good believers—credulous anyway. But it has nothing to do with *faith*.” I shut up; I could feel my voice beginning to crack—on that word.

“Aaaaah,” he sighed. “But there will be witnesses other than yourself. People who do not lie for living.” What was meant to be a mere echo of my own words took on in his voice the tone of frivolous sin. “If you can get witnesses, it will be the better. There are hard men, you see, who must pretend that they do not want the canonization. They are called the advocates of the devil.” That too sounded terrible.

“Witnesses?” I said. “Oh, heavens, it was so long ago. I honestly think you’d better go to some peasant woman in black.”

“No hurry,” he said. His glass emptied, he got up. I got up with him. “You cannot be *forced*. You are to consider it, at least consider. That is all.” He pointed his archiepiscopal ring toward the picture gallery of myself and the great. “I see,” he said, “that he is not there.” He had had a look at them then, a minor bit of homework, the cheating kind done in a rush in school just before the teacher comes in seeking a picture of Voltaire and Christ together, smiling, godless artists and actresses all about.

“That,” I said with finicking care, “is a *secular* portrait gallery. Although there, you see, is Aldous Huxley.” And I gestured at myself grim and the stone-eyed mescaline saint laughing.

“Yes yes.” He did not seem to have heard of him. He beamed through the tall window at the garden scene: Father Azzopardi and Geoffrey taking tea together at a small green table under a white umbrella, Geoffrey talking and gesturing with animation, Father Azzopardi nodding, taking it all in. “These young people,” said His Grace. And then, prodding my ribs very familiarly: “No hurry, I say. But still please regard the matter as urgent.” One of those contradictions that come easily to the religious mind, God being quite as large as Walt Whitman.

The gardeners kissed his ring, the maids kissed his ring, Joey Grima the cook kissed his ring. Ali did not but was shaken hands with very cordially and treated to a final Semitic quip. And when Geoffrey and I escorted His Grace to his Daimler, which was parked by Percius's Garage, the Triq Il-Kbira being narrow and my house possessing no forecourt, many villagers came running to kiss his ring—the two Borg sisters from the corner grocery, the entire staff of the police station opposite, an ancient squaw known atheist in a flat cap who, all dusty, looked like some effigy from Malta's Paleolithic past newly exhumed, embarrassed children pushed to it by their mothers, even the drivers and conductors of three converging buses whose passages the emerged Daimler blocked. I would now be thought better off in Lija and even neighboring Attard and Balzan. The retired brigadier down the road, who, as Geoffrey had told me, despised me as a man grown rich on the writing of filthy yarns, was not so graced by archiepiscopal visitations. Geoffrey was saying, too loudly, to Father Azzopardi: "We could arrange a private showing for you. We have all the gear here. You'll never see it in the public cinemas. But for Christ's sake don't tell the archbish." Father Azzopardi laughed terribly heartily. To me His Grace said: "I'll be happy to see your deposition then. Mastery of the English language. Many happy birthdays once more. And please tell your young friend to be careful." No fool, then: he did not miss much. Father Azzopardi got in front with the driver, His Grace waved and blessed from the dead middle of the rear cushions, and the holy car sped soundlessly toward, say, Birkirkara.

"Poor young swine," Geoffrey said as we went indoors. "I told him all about copulating priests and nuns in hot pants in the States. He doesn't know his arse from his elbow. What was it all about then?"

"As I foresaw, I am to assist in the canonization of the late Pope."

"Oh God, oh my God, oh my dear God, you? Oh, Christ help us."

"Don't be silly, Geoffrey. You forget certain facts of my biography, if you ever, which I am inclined to doubt, knew them."

"Ah, getting all stuffy now, are we?"

"His Grace also asked me to tell you to watch your step."

"Did, did he? I see. Highly honored. Has his bulldogs sniffing round Strait Street, does he? Oh Jesus Lucifer Beelzebub Almighty, how I loathe and detest this bloody place."

"You mean, I think, that there is no decent tradition of Islamic pederasty here. The whole place dedicated to good Catholic family making. It is also, you would say, excessively hippy and bosomy. No dirty little boys with bodies like straight sharp knives."

"You fucking hypocrite." He said this with little malice and followed it with a snigger. "None of that eh? You must accompany me to the Gut sometime, dear."

"The Gut?"

"What the sailors call Strait Street."

"I see, I see." We walked out into the garden with its fine high thick walls, walls built by men used to sieges. "I think the archbishop was right to ask me to ask you to watch your step," I said.

"Fucking shithouse of a bloody place."

I said, as we strolled down a shaded path, seeing the three cats play ambushes: "You know, Geoffrey

if you're really unhappy—"

"Yes yes, dear. Percy in the Bahamas would be only too ready to have me, and there's Fran palpitating for friendship in Lausanne. The vicariously literary life of Geoff Enright, or from pillow post office among the expatriate *masters*." He kicked a pruned twig out of his path. "I suppose, though I have been just a bit wayward. The mail's piling up, as I am well aware. There are probably one or two royalty checks lying under the scum. But tomorrow morning—*early*—on the stroke of ten—I will really get down to the grind again." Knowing, of course, perfectly well, of course, that the old bitch had much longer to go and one might as well, my dear, see the whole bloody business through. "Because you see, Kenneth"—he aspirated and nasalized my name and made it campily preposterous—"I am, in spite of my frequently quite unvolitional and usually deeply regretted misdemeanors, the thing you have averred rather too often that I am not. I mean *faithful*." I felt tears again ready to prick at the word. "Spiritually, I mean, I think I mean. I mean, what do you call it when it isn't just physical? The other thing doesn't really matter, does it? You've positively *sermonized* on that yourself, isn't that so. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't you announce this very afternoon that that sort of thing was all over? For you, that is. All all, ah, over."

We had arrived at a massive siege wall crawling with greenery, so we turned about, seeing the ambushing cats from another angle. The two gardeners, Mr. Borg and Mr. Grima—these seemed to be very nearly the only two surnames in Lija—were still placidly irrigating.

I said, "Why don't we at least look at the more important letters after dinner? I've always, as you know, tried to be—"

"Gentlemanly and punctilious, yes dear. But we're dining out. And there is to be a birthday cake though not, I surmise, with eighty-one candles."

"I didn't know. I'm not going. I'm not up to it."

"But you have to be up to it, dear. It's the British Council man, Ralph Ovington, and the *Poet Laureate* no less, is on a visit."

"Oh, my God. And who defers to whom?"

"A nice point, isn't it? You're the senior, of course. But he has the O. M."

Yes, Dawson Wignall had the O. M. I saw myself in Geoffrey's twin mirrors—quite cold, not at all bitter. Willie Maugham, poor old bastard, had always maintained that the Order of Merit was really the Order of Morals. Three years previously I had been made, like him, a Companion of Honor and then I heard the door of official laureation bang shut on me. The C. H. is about what the old bitch is worth, I say. As for the Nobel, I did not write inelegantly or tendentiously enough. I was not, like Boris Dyengizhdad, in political chains which, I felt sure, he would break soon enough when the dollar royalties had mounted sufficiently. I did not, like Chaim Manon or J. Raha Jaatinen, belong to a gallant little nation that, possessing no strategical resources, had to be compensated with a great writer. I was not, they had always said, cynical, not given to deep feelings or high thoughts. But I still sold well enough. Geoffrey's office bulged with as yet unanswered fan mail; my birthday had been very adequately remembered. I fulfilled a need, and that was for some reason wrong.

I said, sulkily, "I didn't know about this. Nobody told me."

"You held Ralph Ovington's note in your very own hand, dear. You said nice of him nice of him and some such rubbish. You forget, you know, you forget things."

"I'm entitled not to be well enough."

"Listen, dear," Geoffrey said. "Have we not here the most delicious *classical* bit of psychowhatsit in everyday life? It's *Ralph*, isn't it, the name *Ralph*?" I looked at him. Strangely enough, it was true. Strangely, because I thought I'd got over Freud. I'd even dreamt of Freudian interpretations of the

dreams I had just been dreaming. And there I had been kicking Ovington's name and note an invitation out of my head because of an onomastic coincidence. "Black bastard," Geoffrey said with a tone of malice. "Black bitch. Dear, you really must show yourself as often as possible at your advanced age, you know. Oh, you and I know you're alive and well and, well, wonderful really, but it's a good thing to show it to the Poet Laureate, who's an awful little gossip. If you didn't turn up he'd take it back home, you know, that the old bugger's on his way off to the neverneverland, and you'd have the newspapers sharpening their obituaries. Terrible thing, that."

I sighed deeply. "Very well. I'll rest a little before dressing. In the study. Get Ali to bring me in some strong tea and a few pastries."

"Is that wise, dear?" There was the old harridan in a terminal coma, oozing with goo.

"Of course it's not wise. Nothing I do will be wise any more."

On the walls of my study I had a Willem de Kooning female in mostly red crayon and one of the first sketches Picasso had done for *Les Femmes d'Alger*, also an Egon Schiele wash drawing of ugly lovers and an abstract composition by Hans Hartung. I had two oxblood leather club chairs and matching couch, old-fashioned and chunky. Also books in glass cases, mostly of the well-thumbed favorite variety: the main library was next to the upper salon. Near the original Quiller-Couch edition stood, not well-thumbed, not favorite, the revised *Oxford Book of English Verse*, bloody Val Wrigley editor. I took this down and lay on the couch with it, looking for the inevitable selection from Dawson Wignall. I did not much care for what I found—insular, ingrown, formally traditional, products of a stunted mind. Wignall's themes derived from Anglican church services, the Christmas parties of his childhood, his public school pubescence, suburban shopping streets; they occasionally exhibited the perverse velleities of a fetishistic order, though his droolings over girls' bicycles and gym tunics and black woolen stockings were chilled by whimsical ingenuities of diction. For this sort of thing, then, I had been honored by the monarch:

Thus kneeling at the altar rail
We ate the Word's white papery wafer.
Here, so I thought, desire must fail,
My chastity be never safer.
But then I saw your tongue protrude
To catch the wisp of angel's food.
Dear God! I reeled beneath the shock:
My Eton suit, your party frock,
Christmas, the dark, and postman's knock!

I returned the book to the shelf and took down *Who's Who*, nearly staggering under its weight. I humped it over to what I called my Directory escritorio and laid it on the blotting pad. There he was Wignall, Percival Dawson—not yet OM, but tinkling with other awards. His list of literary achievements was exiguous enough, spare output being the mark of a gentleman writer, but the autobiographical epic called *Lying in Grass* was probably the dehydrated equivalent of ten of my watery novels. I turned to my own entry and gloomed proudly over a whole column of overproduction. Wignall was also Harrow and Trinity College; I was the Thomas More Memorial School and nothing. Ali knocked and called *adelante*. While he placed the tea tray on the coffee table I heaved *Who's Who* back, shouldered rather. The aroma was of Twining's Breakfast Tea, which I took at all times except breakfast; breakfast I drank Blue Mountain. Ali stood waiting as I poured.

“¿Sí?”

He was troubled about something but found difficulty in expressing it. Something metaphysical then, not wages or women or living conditions. At length he said, “Allah.”

“Allah, Ali?”

“Este país,” he said, “es católico, pero se dice Allah.”

“Yes, Ali.” The cakes were Kunzel, imported in dainty packets of six. It was a comfort to be on a soil of British soil again. “Their word for God is evidently the same as yours, but it means the Christian version of the Almighty, not the Muslim one.”

This clearly troubled him. He said excitedly that there was no God but Allah, but Allah was not worshiped in churches, only in mosques, and that Allah was certainly not, so to speak, administered by *arzobispos*. In Tangier, he said, the whole situation had been perfectly understandable. The Christians had spoken of *Dios*. He understood that in their churches they had spoken of *Deus*—the same name almost. Here, however, in their churches—the *arzobispo* had told him in the bar there, while he drank deep in the manner of Christians—they referred to God as Allah. He did not understand. Not, of course as I well knew, that he was what one might term a religious man. But the situation here struck him as strange. He had been taught as a boy that there was no God but Allah, and the Tangerine Christians had said there was no God but *Dios* or *Deus*. But these Maltese Christians said, just like Muslims, that there was no God but Allah. In churches. It was a strange situation. More, it was what might be termed a *buca* situation. That I should properly understand this, Ali gave me all available ways of putting it: *malva malvada - maligna - aciaga*.

I had now eaten my third Kunzel cake, enough. I said: “Once, Ali, in Catholic churches all over the world, they used the Latin name *Deus*. But now they have what is called the vernacular, since very few ordinary people know Latin. In mosques all over the world they say Allah, but in Catholic churches all over the world they use the vernacular. In Serbo-Croat *Bog*, in Finnish *Jumala*, I think, and in Swahili I know, *Mungu*. Now here in Malta their language is a kind of Arabic, though it uses the alphabet of the Romans. And in Arabic and Maltese the word for God is the same—*Allah*. Is that moderately clear?”

It was clear, he said, but it seemed somehow bad. Still, presumably the big men—*arzobispos* and so on—knew what they were doing, but nevertheless it did not seem right for Catholics in their churches to be calling on Allah. Then he changed the subject by taking from his white jacket pocket a small parcel and shyly handing it to me. It was a little *regalo*, he said, today being my *cumpleaños*. I checked the emotional lability by wondering why he had not made the presentation earlier. Perhaps because he knew that Geoffrey would say something sneering about it and this was the first time today he had found me alone. “Thank you, Ali, very very much,” unwrapping it. It was pretty horrible, of course, by the standards of the sneerers of the world: a cigarette lighter of cheap metal encrusted with a Maltese cross. “Beautiful,” I said. Ali waited. I struck it and it worked. Ali waited. I got myself a cigarette and lighted it. “Wonderful,” I said, having drawn deeply. “It imparts a special taste to the tobacco.” That was the kind of manifestly insincere response that Al’s culture required. Satisfied, he nodded and went out, saying something with Allah in it, perhaps appropriate to a birthday. So. It looked as if it were not going to be easy to get away from His late Holiness Pope Gregory XVII today, meaning fat little Don Carlo Campanati. His reforms were upsetting even Ali.

I lay on the couch shortening my life and clutching Ali’s gift like some token of faith—nominally, inappositely, considering the Maltese cross. I thought of my brother Tom, who had smoked three cigarettes in his entire career and yet had died of lung cancer at forty-four. Tommy Toomey. With a name like that he had been destined to set up as a professional comedian, and he had done well enough especially on the British radio in the 1930s. But the cough had become increasingly a hindrance to his sharp bright somewhat high-pitched delivery. Comedians of the old demotic school, like George Formby, Sr., had been able to make comic capital out of audibly dying (“Coughing better today, ladies and so on), but Tom’s way had been one of rapid wit. His specialty had been the surrealist reshaping of English history, and this had presupposed an audience of some education. Such an audience was ceasing to exist when Tom’s onstage or in-studio coughing began to be uncontrollable. He had had the

best of his time when he came to die, and he knew it. He died in the faith in a hospital near Hendo having tried to joke some few hours before about a special niche in Purgatory for British Catholic comedians. He died clutching something—rosary beads, probably. I put Ali's gift in my trouser pocket. I supposed that Tom might find it easier to get out of Purgatory—if the now much impaired eschatology of fat Carlo's Church still admitted its existence if he had a saint more or less in the family or should I say more precisely had a saint as brother to his sister's husband. Then, having doused my life-shortener, I savored an old man's doze.

The residence of the British Council representative was in a quieter and perhaps more patrician part of Lija than my own. Geoffrey, sitting tied and jacketed next to Ali, who was driving, pointed this out, adding however that the whole bloody island was bloody terrible and he bloody hated it. Having arrived, we told Ali to come back in two hours, and then Geoffrey rang the doorbell, composing his sullen face, now unadorned by twin mirrors, to a twinkling vacuity. The British Council representative appeared, together with his wife. Mrs. Ovington was a big fair woman in a long candy-striped dress, her face bronzed and wrinkled. The bronze and, to some extent, the wrinkles were a badge of long service in the sunnier and duller stations of the world. They had had Warsaw for a couple of years, and there had once been talk of their being sent to Paris, but it had usually been places like Beirut and Baghdad. The wrinkles could also be accounted for by the long professional habit of insincere smiling. Ovington, who had a sun-and-tobacco-bleached stallion forelock falling onto his forehead, was also a smiler, but only with his teeth, which were of various shapes and colors and usually, as now, had a hearty Dunhill pipe stuck between them. They greeted me with laughs and shouts of “Got here, then?” and “Jolly good” but no happy returns. They were no strangers to me. They had presided over the Writers’ Week that I had been asked to inaugurate, all of twelve years back, in Sydney. Sydney was regarded as a great British Council plum, but Ovington had not got on with the Aussies. They had all come to see me when I had been settling in here in Malta, with “Jolly good” and a jar of homemade cognac-flavored orange and lemon marmalade. It was good marmalade and I had not yet quite finished it. They were good people.

Ann Ovington dramatically stopped wrinkling and dragged me out into the forecourt. “Rather unfortunate,” she said rapidly. “But you’ll understand, and he won’t. Sciberras, the Maltese poet, meant. We had to have him along to meet Dawson, and he took the wrong turning out of the loo and barged into the kitchen, and there he saw the damned cake. Then he said how thoughtful and kind and the rest of it. Apparently it’s his birthday today as well as yours, and he doesn’t know it’s yours, happy birthday by the way, and—well, you see the awkwardness of it. I’ve already primed everybody else well, not your Geoffrey yet of course, but I will, no good leaving it to Ralph, he’d take all night explaining anyway. I know you’ll see it as, well, you know, humorous. Short story stuff.”

“Indeed,” I said. With sadness I saw it as (indeed) short story stuff. If these had still been my writing days I would have itched to go off with that little seed of fiction, abandoning the party, knowing that what I was to invent would be far more entertaining and, in a sense, truer than the impending reality. “Does this Mr. er—”

“Sciberras.”

“Does he know me? My work, I mean.”

“I don’t think so. You know what these people are like.”

“A job for the British Council.”

“How right you are. No lady guests, by the way. Except John’s girl friend. I hope that’s in order.”

“Why what how—”

“Your Geoffrey said something about giants of literature meeting and no damned nonsense about

sexual symmetry.”

“But this is absurd. Also insolent. I would never make such a stipulation. This you know.”

“I’m inclined to agree with your Geoffrey. All you bachelors. I discovered there was a Mrs. Sciberras but it’s the poet’s mother. She speaks only Maltese and prefers to watch television anyway. So that all right.”

“I’ll have a word with that damned Geoffrey.”

“Oh, don’t spoil your evening.” She wrinkled and took my arm and urged me in. In the mouldy smelling downstairs salon the two other writers were on their feet, drinking. Dawson Wignall O. M. I decided we had met before, which we hadn’t, and came for me with a hand out at shoulder level, the other hand tremoloing an iced whisky like a little bell (I tintinnabulate for you/A birthday wish that warm and true).

“What?” he laughed. “Eh?” Question tags, not questions: British upper-class greetings often sound like confirmations of something. I gave him hearty congratulations without specifying on what, and he said, with mock-embarrassed mock seriousness, “Well—you know.” Then he was all laughter again, round duck-down-headed hamster-toothed children’s book illustration of a benign humanoid who held the office John Dryden had once held. Sciberras, the Maltese poet, was introduced to me, or it may have been the other way round. I was given a sturdy gin and tonic in a rummer almost too heavy for me to hold. I got in first at Sciberras with many happy returns and he must forgive my not knowing his word. I hadn’t had time yet to start trying to learn Maltese.

“Ah, but I write in Italian too,” he shouted conversationally. “You must start to learn Italian.”

“Then,” the Poet Laureate said, with a tartness that made me want to like him, “he could read Dante as well as you.”

“I know some Italian,” I said. “Indeed, we once had Italians in the family.”

“I know,” Dawson Wignall said somewhat irritably. “Of course I know.” Meaning that we great public men had no secrets from each other.

“I was saying that to him,” I said. “Mr. Scribble er ass here.”

“And I was saying what I said to him too,” Dawson Wignall said.

“Yes yes,” I said. “I understand—a ‘mot’.” Sciberras looked from one to the other of us, sipping a cold drink as if it were a hot one. “A ‘mot’,” I repeated, straight at him. “The French word for a word. But perhaps you write also in French.”

“In Maltese and in Italian,” Sciberras said more loudly, as if I had not clearly understood him the first time. “Only good night in Malta do we say in French. The French were not here long. The Maltese people made the French to go.”

“Yes,” I said. “So your archbishop told me. The Maltese people got rid of the French. One of my mother’s ancestors just missed being one of the French that the Maltese got rid of, by the way. He was got rid of very nastily by the Mamelukes. In Egypt. The same expedition.” I saw Geoffrey down his whisky mac in one draught and then give me an exaggerated wink. I stared coldly back. God knew how much tanking up he had done before leaving home. No ladies, indeed.

“But you are British,” Sciberras said.

“My mother was French.”

“The Maltese people got rid of the French,” Sciberras shouted.

“When you got rid of them,” Wignall said, “did you perhaps arrange that they were got rid of at night? So you could say *bon soir* to them?” I was beginning to find Wignall tolerable.

“It is *bonne nuit* we say. And in the daytime it is *buon giorno*. That is Italian.”

“Go to bed French,” Wignall said, “and wake up Italian. The best of both worlds. And in the middle

you're Maltese. Jolly good."

Ann Ovington stood by us, benign, wrinkling away. Literary giants meeting. Then she said, "We must see how things are getting on."

"I look forward to my cake," Sciberras shouted roguishly, as though he already knew that he would not much care for the preceding courses.

"Jolly good," she said, wrinkling at him, leaving.

"He's looking forward to his cake," said Wignall very seriously. "Talking of your family, by the way Mrs. Campanati sends her love."

"It is not pronounced like that," declared Sciberras. "It is not neighty but nahty. I know the name. It is an Italian name."

"And so you should know the name," Wignall said. "But in America it rhymes with weighty."

"Hortense?" I said. "You met Hortense?" I pronounced the name in the French way our mother had always insisted on.

"They call her Hortense over there," rhyming with pence. "There used to be a song about my sweet Hortense, as I remember. Got no money and got no sense. Not true of yours, of course. She looked very well. I thought you might like to know. I'd say she looked very modern, very smart and slim and so on. She sends fond regards and so on."

"What were you doing in Bronxville?"

"Reading poems, some of them mine. At Sarah Lawrence. She was at the little party afterwards. Not so little, really. Long, anyway. She seemed to me to be very well." But he nodded somewhat sadly.

"Not," I said in old man's candor, "knocking it back? Not getting stoned or blind or anything?"

"Very fit, I thought. A few, yes. Not too many. She seemed to me to be very well. I told her I'd be going to Malta. She said to say happy birthday and so on. When the time comes, that is." Wignall raised his glass at me and drank. Wignall, I decided, was a very tolerable person. Poet, that was a different matter, but who was I after all really to say?

Geoffrey was talking with Ovington, just by the drinks table, already on his third whisky mac. "She's probably written," I said. "We haven't had time to go over the mail lately, have we, Geoffrey?" He made a vulgar gesture of staggering against the ropes. I introduced him. Wignall said jolly good and Sciberras shouted something cordial and unidiomatic. Wignall said, slowly and clearly, to Sciberras: "Mr. Toomey, besides being perhaps the most distinguished living writer in the British Commonwealth, was also related by marriage to His late Holiness Pope Gregory the Seventeenth."

It was little fat Carlo's day all right. "That I did not know," Sciberras said. Most people were awed by the revelation, but Sciberras kept whatever feelings he had well in check. "I wrote a *sonetto* about him. It is a strange story, also wonderful. He came to me in a dream and said to write it. So I wrote it." He started to shout it out:

"Sempre ch'io veda nel bel cielo azzurro

levarsi bianca vetta scintillante

quel radioso di Sua bontà gigante

al cuore mi rammenta in pio sussurro..."

Both Wignall and I listened in embarrassment, our eyes surveying the icescapes of our drinks. Wignall was not going to let him get away with the whole thing: he was, after all, Poet Laureate. He said, "Very profound. It needs to be looked at, I can tell, and really pored over. Pity to waste it just by blurting it out. Jolly good sonnet, I can tell, though."

"There is also," cried Sciberras, "the wonder of the visit in the dream."

“Yes, I see that. Remarkable, when you come to think of it.”

The Ovington boy and his girl friend had not greeted us. She wore a dirty Mother Hubbard and had neglected damp straw hair about her shoulders. John Ovington's hair was not neglected: it was contained in a headband glistening with bits of colored glass. He wore what I can only think of as a Natty Bumppo outfit, though his long soiled feet disdained moccasins. Home for the holidays, both presumed. The two young people sat tailorwise in the far corner on the floor, sharing a hand-rolled cigarette that stank of autumn twitchfires. Geoffrey kept leering at the boy, but the boy was not interested. Geoffrey was saying to Ralph Ovington: “Don't know how you stand the bloody place. Bloody place gives me the bloody creeps.” He could be more himself without lady guests.

“There are worse.” Ovington smiled, his pipe pluming away as if dinner were over. “You can put up with any place if you have to be in it. If you have to be there you look for the good side. It's being too free that's the trouble perhaps.” He swiveled his smiling head toward the boy and girl, who whispered together, shackled in the conformism of the young. “If you're free you're never satisfied. I've never been free.”

“Oh, bloody Christ. The call of duty and all that balls.”

The word duty made my eyes prick, just like faith and its derivatives. There was a line of Walt Whitman that—”There's a line of Walt Whitman,” I said to Wignall, “that always brings tears to my eyes. Something about ‘all intrepid captains and mates, and those who went down doing their duty.’ And there, to prove it, were the tears in my eyes.”

“Stock response,” said Wignall. “The Cambridge School invented the phrase, but only to sneer at it. It's a useful phrase. And you can't make literature without the stock response.”

Geoffrey was sniggering at me. “Those who went down,” he sniggered. “Dear old Walt knew all about going down.”

“Shut up, Geoffrey,” I found myself saying with prep schoolmaster's sharpness. “Do you hear me? Shut up.”

“Sorry, dear. But you must admit it's a bit comic, going down, doing his duty. Nurse Walt. A whale of a time in the war.”

“It is not to be laughed at,” cried Sciberras. “We did our duty. We did not go down. Except to the air raid shelter.”

“Yes yes yes,” said the Poet Laureate, somewhat unhappy, but not half as unhappy as I. “We're all very proud of you, yes yes. The George Cross and all that. Jolly brave people, you Maltese.”

“Who is he, then?” Geoffrey said. “This George Cross character, I mean.”

“It is not a person but a thing,” Sciberras shouted. “For valor in the Second World War, the whole island. I wrote a *sonetto*—”

“In Italian too?” said Wignall. “Jolly forgiving of you.”

“No relation to Double Cross,” Geoffrey said, helping himself to his fifth or sixth whisky mac, “the bugger who always came twice? And while we're on notable personalities, did you ever meet Joe Plus the man with the velvet—”

“I said stop it, Geoffrey,” I ground out. “Stop this nonsense at once.”

“Or Chunky, the man with the pineapple ballocks?”

“Not heard that one before,” Wignall lied. “Jolly good.”

“The names,” Sciberras called, “are not familiar to me.”

“Oh Jesus bloody Belial Beelzebub, Lord of the Open Flies. Where's your bloody sense of bloody humor?”

Ovington kept smiling, pipe gripped hard. His wife came in, wrinkling jollily, to say: “Grub's up

chaps.”

“Bring that in,” Ovington said to Geoffrey, pipe gripped hard.

“Not worth it, old boy old boy,” and he drained it. “Now lead me to the costly vintages.”

“Maltese wines tonight,” Ovington said. “You did say you wanted to try some, Dawson. Improved lot lately.”

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