

### A DIFFICULT GESTATION - PART 3

“I was sorry to hear about your wife.”

The Widower shrugs.

“I've taken a few knocks myself,” says the American. “So I decided to tie up some loose ends while there's time. I hope you're not sore about what happened? Between her and me?”

The Widower shrugs again. “Anything else on your mind?”

His Visitor pulls a large package from his bag and sets it on the desk.

“I already have a telephone directory,” says the Widower.

“It's the only copy in the world. Take good care of it. Or, do whatever the hell you like.”

The Widower stares at the package.

“Is that really it? Didn't they destroy it?”

A Man leaned into her face.

His breath smelt of decay and cheap tobacco. When she coughed he took another drag on his cigarette and exhaled carefully over the rest of her face.

*This, she thought, is some torment out of prep school. He doesn't see I love it. Need it...*

He smiled. “We've expelled your yankee paramour. He's gone. We can ban you too. Easy to arrange, as you know. People die. What a shame. Understood? Or...”

“Or what?”

“You help us. The Book vanishes. What were you thinking? There is a war on, you know.”

*My Book? This is about the Book? Our Book. How does he know? How am I here? A policeman asks me to help. So I go with him and... They sit me down and I am shackled to this chair. By metal cuffs that... Fit my wrists? Handcuffs for women?*

“Don't I know you?” she said. “Are we related?”

“Everyone who is anyone in this country is related to everyone else who is anyone.”

“So why are you doing this to me?”

He studied her through the church of his fingers then said: “The Rule here is I ask the questions. You answer. Do not presume. Do not protest.”

He pointed to a bloated glass and gold ornament on the desk. “These Lovers are Cadmus and Hermione as described by Ovid. They clasp a clock which symbolises the role of time in affairs of the heart. Time brings together. Time bonds. Time separates. Love turned these two into disgusting lizards. But they are not as disgusting as you and your American.”

He could not help but crow. “I found the Book in your study. I have read it.”

He waited for her to interrupt. But she was silent.

“Your Book is poison. How dare you write it? You say yourself the War is still on? Yes, the Masses are on the move. They rose up in Russia. Are still in charge. They tried elsewhere, but failed. They will try again. They will try here too and you would help them with your poison. For the poison of revolution is spread by the virus of words. So you write sex like the French do.”

*Which I see you read and enjoy...*

“You write of Bishops dying in brothels. An unbalanced Prime Minister. Sapphism. Drug use in Pall

Mall. Criminal gangs conspiring with the Police. An officer class that is utterly incompetent... You systematically ridicule and defame all our cherished institutions. Though your real target is the elite that rules us so wisely and so well. Your Book is the fuse of dynamite that means to destroy Church, State and Monarchy. You also ridicule me. I am your character Richard. A brainless, idle, mediocrity who blames his failure on a woman."

*And you found this out by snooping and theft? I know you now. You are the little beast who sat behind me at Uncle Marinus's film shows for children. You kept pestering me. Until...*

"I punched you out, Marcus Tollivant," she said.

"Now I'll punch you back, Mrs Famous writer. Here's the deal, as your Yank would say. Keep your book. But I'll have it gutted and re-written by a chum at Cambridge. He'll edit out the red bits but leave your own pathetic words in. They're easy to spot. We'll get our man to publish it. Get it well reviewed. *A worthy modernist classic... Better than Joyce...* What do you think?"

"That's worse than destroying it," she said. "You corrupt its soul."

"If you say so, Madame Flaubert. How perceptive. Even Modernism has a role in protecting the status quo we all enjoy. So..?"

The Man looked at his watch, then inverted the hour glass. The lizards pivoted on their axes and the flow reversed.

She agreed. Holding back tears. And he was as bad as his word. Her dreams blew away. She achieved a lesser fame in her own eyes. But a greater one in others. Which made things worse...

"So there was another copy," says the Widower. "All along? The loss ate her up. Kept her awake at night. She cried for it. Like a..."

"Of course there was another copy, pal. We co-wrote it, didn't we? Anyway, I guess you should have it. What will you do? Sorry for the delay. But there was a war on."

"I am aware of that. But honestly, I don't know what I should do."

"Your choice, sir. But what will happen to her reputation if this gets out?"

"Not a lot. She is venerated. People have other things to think about. As do you, my friend."

The American smiles and reached for a cigarette. Then remembers he has given them up.

As they part at the door the Widower shakes hands with the American.

"Excuse me," the Widower says. "Just one thing you should know, Mr Hammett. It might amuse you."

"Yes, Mr Woolf?"

"That MI5 man, who tormented our lady Friend. Marcus Tollivant."

"What about him?"

"He's in jail now. It turned out he'd been working for the Soviets all along. Ever since he was recruited at Oxford. A true red Communist. He targeted you two just to cover himself. Thank you for the Book. I will enjoy reading it. Safe journey home."

The American tips his hat to his Museum Lover for old time's sake and takes a cab straight to Heathrow.

