

Eugenica

A Novel by

Peter C Whitaker



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An Alternative History Novel

By

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“Is it written yet?!”

I love you!

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In Memory of David Moody who loved this book and was not afraid to tell me so.

Finally, in memory of Roy, Nick, Barry, and Barbara, friends from my youth who never got to see how good life can be.

*“The United Kingdom escaped eugenics laws
by the skin of its teeth.”*

***Russell Sparkes.
The Enemy of Eugenics. 1999.***

“But what if it hadn’t?”

***Peter C Whitaker.
2015.***

Prologue

“Eugenics deals with what is more valuable than money or lands, namely the heritage of a high character, capable brains, fine physique, and vigour; in short, with all that is most desirable for a family to possess as a birthright. It aims at the evolution and preservation of high races of men, and it as well deserves to be strictly enforced as a religious duty.”

Sir Francis Galton.

Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims. 1904.

New Year's Eve. London. 1931.

Celebrating New Year's Eve at Windsor House, Belgravia, was a traditional event and a highlight of the local social calendar. Although Dr. Clark Hunter was not a vivacious person by nature his wife, Jennifer, made a delightful and engaging hostess. She had nurtured a social life of her own to combat the loneliness caused by her husband's frequent absences. It went a long way towards filling the void that his work had caused in their marriage over the years. Such were the demands made upon him in his capacity as a highly regarded medical scientist.

Jennifer did not scold him or complain or seek solace elsewhere. She accepted that loneliness was the price she paid for being the wife of a successful man dedicated. He had always admired her integrity, loyalty, and independent spirit, qualities that had allowed their marriage to succeed where so many others might have foundered. His generosity towards her in material things went some way towards mitigating his absences. She had this beautiful house, a car, servants, everything that he believed a modern woman could want. Everything that a woman of her class required. It caused him pain, however, when he contemplated how much of the time spent away from his wife had been wasted. It was a realisation made in hindsight, of course, but valid all the same. He had striven to validate a hypothesis that had proven to be false. Many scientists, working in other fields, had done the same, but that was not the contentious point. It was finally admitting to himself what he had known for several years, that eugenics was a false science. He had lacked the necessary courage to confront that truth. Even now it might be too late.

The Belgravia New Year's Eve party had evolved without Dr. Hunter ever having been active in its planning or delivery. Nevertheless, he had never missed a single occasion to be stood beside his wife as she greeted their guests on this annual event. It was a very small act undertaken to repay her love for him, an affection that had never wilted.

Dr. Hunter stood in the doorway between the lounge and the hall. A fine Cuban cigar held in one hand, a glass of red wine in the other. He surveyed the sea of faces that surrounded Jennifer, bubbling surf on the shores of a beautiful island. She was now 54 years old, but she looked younger. She had always looked younger than her age. Good health still imbued her cheeks with a rosy complexion. Rouge was unnecessary. Long dark hair, full of natural lustre, was expertly coiffured. It displayed her elegant neck, around which draped a silver and emerald necklace. Green eyes sparkled effervescently as she chatted with the friends that she knew so much more intimately than he did. Her smile was ready and warm, again, totally natural.

The house was aglow with good cheer. It felt a warm and friendly place to be. Twelve months previously, Dr. Hunter would not have had to force a convivial spirit. At Jennifer's urging, something else that had also become a tradition in this particular season, he would have allowed sufficient alcohol to pass his lips so that he would become more relaxed and begin to enjoy the company of her guests. Tonight, however, his heart weighed too heavily. The claret in his glass was for show. He had not yet tasted it. The cigar created a smokescreen behind which he hid his face and, he hoped, his fears.

It was something of a relief to him that their son was absent tonight. Jennifer had bemoaned the fact, as was to be expected. It had occurred to Dr. Hunter that his son might have proven a powerful ally on such a night as this. He was not, however, thinking in a social context. He had spent many years successfully keeping the boy removed from the tentacles of the Verdure. Simply using his son to protect himself now seemed too trite an excuse to break that habit. It was more important that the truth was safeguarded and that 'Doc Hunter', as the boy had popularly become known, be preserved as a possible weapon of retribution at a later date. A date that he did not expect to see himself.

An insistent vibration immediately attracted his attention. Moving swiftly, but without alarm, Dr. Hunter retreated into the hallway where there were only a handful of people. They were transient, passing through from one room to another. He placed his glass on a console table in front of a large mirror. Pushing back the sleeve of his jacket he exposed a device that looked something like a large wristwatch. Instead of the usual face of a timepiece, however, it had a circle of fine wire mesh.

"Speak!" He commanded in a stentorian tone.

"It has been effectuated, sir." A tinny voice that he instantly recognised responded.

"Any complications?"

"She was inchoately aporetic in the primary instance but metamorphosed a more amenable temperament in due course."

"But you followed my instructions?"

"With habitual definitude, sir."

"Very good. Thank you for repaying my constant trust in your abilities."

"Your approbation is perpetually venerated, sir. In conclusion, fare thee well." A soft click confirmed that the communication had ended.

Dr. Hunter smiled to himself. He would miss William Harper's extended vocabulary, and his considerable abilities. He was assured, however, that his faithful assistant and friend would soon be safe, pursuing a new life in America. He would take with him a new identity, and enough money to make of his undoubted talents anything that he so wished.

With the brief but also very important conversation concluded he pushed his jacket sleeve back into place. A considerable weight had been removed from his shoulders. A covert objective achieved. He retrieved his glass of claret and raised it to the level of his eyes. Gently spinning the stem between his fingers he examined the deep crimson of the wine in the light cast from the crystal chandelier that illuminated the hallway.

Too much value has been placed upon the concept of blood and its presumed qualities of being either good or bad.

For the first time that evening he sipped the wine in his glass and allowed it to wash over his palette, even evincing a little pleasure at the experience. His spirits lifted accordingly. He turned with the intention of going to his wife and giving her a kiss. It would be a genuine expression of his affection for her. A movement on the

broad stairs caught his eye. His instinct warned him of danger. Dr. Hunter saw a man in immaculate evening dress, complete with white gloves. The man ceased his descent and smiled genially but his eyes were cold.

“Good evening, Dr. Hunter. This is an excellent party that you are hosting. On another occasion, I would enjoy myself immensely, as I have in the past, but tonight is not really an evening for such festivities as far as the likes of you and I are concerned, is it?” His voice was cultured, clear, and precise.

“Perhaps my study would be more suitable?” Dr. Hunter suggested. His premonition had been realised sooner than he had expected. He remained calm, however.

“Ideal!” The other enthused with yet another cold smile. He immediately turned and began to climb the stairs again.

Dr. Hunter paused for a moment. He was sorely tempted to go and kiss Jennifer this very instant. He realised, however, that he would find it difficult to excuse himself immediately thereafter. That would only annoy his unwanted guest further. To console his disappointment he looked directly at her and consumed the image of her face, her elegance, her beauty, one last time. In that moment he felt an ache of regret that both pierced his heart and confirmed a truth; he loved Jennifer.

In her youth, she had been something of an athlete, at least as far as the society of that day would allow a young woman to be one. Jennifer lacked his academic interests, but she had been educated to a good standard. In Clark Hunter, she had found a husband who encouraged her independent spirit more than was to be expected. That may have been one of the reasons why she had remained with him for so long. He had never sought to proscribe her freedom or fetter her with the chains of social convention.

And he did love her.

It suddenly crossed his mind to make a fight of it. Resistance, he knew, would only put her in danger, however. That was something that he had always striven to avoid. He chose, instead, to accept his fate. He was not exactly a martyr, but he did not ascend the stairs like a condemned man either. Rather, he moved in an unhurried fashion, drink in one hand, cigar in the other.

His study was on the first floor, towards the back of the house. It overlooked an expansive walled garden. The door was open and he could see that a light was already illuminating the interior as he approached the room. Upon entering he found the man with the white gloves stood appreciating an oil painting that hung over the fireplace. The man with the gloved turned and smiled at him again.

“A fine example of impressionism, *Falaise* by Claude Monet I believe?” He spoke rhetorically and waved the doctor to one of the two green leather Chesterfield chairs that faced the unlit fireplace. As Dr. Hunter took the proffered seat, a little annoyed at the presumption of the other to take command in his own study, his uninvited guest closed the door.

“I suppose that you do not feel in the mood for a drink, Boulstridge?” Dr. Hunter’s voice remained strong and vibrant.

“No thank you,” the other replied. He took the companion chair in a relaxed manner, crossing his legs. “As I think you have realised, I am not here in a social capacity.”

“Obviously, as you were not invited on this occasion. Your presence suggests that the Verdure are not willing to allow me to retire gracefully?”

“Sadly, no, that will not be permitted to happen. We are at an impasse, as they say. You have in your possession various documents that are of the utmost value to the

Verdure. You requested to be allowed to withdraw from public life and service, the price of that egress is the surrender of the said documents, but you refuse to pay the toll. You leave us little choice.”

“You paint the picture as if this were all my own doing.”

“Each party has their own interpretation of the matter as it lies before them. I am only a servant, given a commission to fulfil.”

“You make murder sound so reasonable.” He said sarcastically.

“Perhaps that is how I deal with the matter. It is my trade after all.” Boulstridge smiled. It was almost a good-natured expression. “Personally, I have nothing but admiration for you. People like Galton and Pearson talk about a brave new world but you, Doctor, you actually made it happen.”

“I now hold the opposite opinion. What I achieved in the field of eugenics was more through good fortune than good science.”

“Perhaps so, but you cannot deny the existence of your son, or the validation he gives to *Übermensch*?”

“In the first case no, and I never would. In the second case, yes, most vehemently. I do indeed question the presumed validation of *Übermensch*. It is a failed experiment.”

“My masters disagree with you on that point.”

“Obviously, or else you would not be here in your official capacity.”

“Quite!”

“That the Verdure choose to ignore the conclusions that are to be logically drawn from the *Übermensch* experiment is regrettable, but they remain extant all the same. The experiment cannot be repeated with any significant confidence of achieving the same results, certainly not with any meaningful consistency. Even Pearson would have understood the importance of that fact. It can be demonstrated in his beloved science of statistics. Frederick Griffith’s observation that bacteria could be subject to an as yet unidentified transforming factor has been confirmed. It permits the bacteria to change strains, something that should not happen if eugenic thinking is indeed correct. Nikolai Koltsov’s proposition, that such inherited traits are transmitted through a molecule made up of two mirror strands that replicate in a semi-conservative fashion, may well prove to be the transforming factor that Griffith observed in action. This, to my mind, indicates a much more sophisticated system of genetic transmission of heritable traits than that which either Sir Galton or Professor Pearson, or any other eugenicist for that matter, has so far allowed for.”

“Very interesting,” Boulstridge neither looked nor sounded interested. “The real point is, Doctor, that the Prime Minister, Ramsey MacDonald, accepted the support of the British Eugenics Society in his hour of need. Their considerable influence assisted him in winning the General Election back in October. The price is to be the creation of a ministry dedicated to pursuing eugenic principles within Great Britain and throughout the Empire. It is a significant achievement. The Verdure will not tolerate its realisation being threatened.”

“No matter if the cornerstone of the philosophy of eugenics proves to be unsound and, perhaps, even unsafe?”

“Eugenics will move from being a philosophical subject to becoming a positive tool in the real world. America is already progressing down this path, as are several Scandinavian countries. I understand that Germany is also very interested in the subject. They will all become stronger and healthier as a result. You cannot wish for your country to fall behind such competitors?”

“I wish only for Britain to advance upon the correct scientific principles for social betterment. I no longer recognise the axioms that guide eugenics as being such.”

“You once did, however. I believe that you even attended a lecture given by the esteemed Sir Francis Galton himself?”

“I did indeed. It was the occasion of the second Huxley lecture, at the Royal Anthropological Institute, in 1901. I appreciated the vision that Sir Francis presented to us then of a better world. My mind, however, has always been open to the influence of empirical evidence. Scientific evidence. What I have discovered since that lecture fails to support the claims that Sir Francis made in 1901. They have been repeated by many other eugenicists, none of whom have been able to provide any evidence to support their arguments.”

“And yet you have indulged in practical experiments to attain the eugenic goal. All paid for by the Verdure, I might add.”

“Quite correct. I was recruited to test the eugenicists’ claim to the improvement of the species through selective breeding. Initially, it seemed logical. Early experiments using plants and stock animals suggested as much. Later experiments, using human subjects, were not so successful. It is the results of those experiments that led me to question the basic principles of the transmission of hereditary characteristics from one generation to the next. That is what scientists do when the evidence does not support the hypothesis. You said that eugenics will move from a philosophical to a practical state and yet you also know that it has already, and failed.”

“Again, my masters disagree with you there. Your son remains a shining example of their thinking.”

“The Verdure have sponsored many experiments in the name of eugenics, most of them a waste of time and effort. I told them this when they passed the designs for their most recent experiments over for my consideration. You know there really is no point in using science to validate a theory if you are not willing to accept the evidence that presents itself at the conclusion of the said experiments.”

“Well, that is a matter that I leave to the more erudite of our brethren. Out of my profound respect for you, however, I will make one more offer that will give you an avenue for redemption; surrender the *Übermensch* papers!”

“You already have them.”

“We have some of them, but they are not complete. Those that you chose to retain contain the most valuable data for future experiments. Clearly, you understood this when you made your decision to force this very interview?”

“I find it curiously satisfying that the Verdure will go to such lengths to secure documents that it argues do not contradict the very precepts upon which its eugenics philosophy is built. The desperation that drives your masters to this extreme action also verifies my scepticism. You do see the irony don’t you, Boulstridge?”

“That irony may extend as far as your assistant, William Harper.”

“William has no place in this.” Dr. Hunter forced his voice to remain even.

“He has a place by association.” Boulstridge insisted.

“William Harper left my employment some eighteen months ago to pursue alternative avenues of interest to himself.”

“But you did not replace him?”

“Why should I? After all, I was planning on retiring anyway, even then. Mr. Harper worked his notice in his usual diligent fashion. He left my papers in an admirable state of organisation, except those pertaining to the Verdure. I never involved him in that side of my working life. You may know that although I oversaw the conduct of those experiments the Verdure maintained absolute control at all times, even down to appointing the staff that I worked with.”

Boulstridge studied the doctor closely. It occurred to him that Hunter might be trying to protect his assistant, but then he had to wonder why that might be. Harper was little more than a personal secretary, a clerk fond of using a verbose vocabulary because it was the only real learning that he had. The secretary was neither a social or intellectual equal to Hunter. Boulstridge had also verified for himself that Harper had left his long-term lodgings with the avowed intent to do a little travelling before he took up a post as a librarian in some provincial town. It was a definite fact that the man was nowhere to be found in the British Isles. It was also a definite fact that the Verdure did indeed control every aspect of their own projects, including who they involved.

“This conversation has now become irrelevant.” Boulstridge rose from his chair in an unhurried manner. Reaching into his jacket he withdrew a small pistol. “We have crossed the Rubicon, Dr. Hunter, and I can see no opportunity for you to return to the other side again.”

“Quite rightly.” Dr. Hunter sounded unperturbed as he watched the other check the chamber of his gun to ensure that it was properly loaded. “My guests?”

“Will remain ignorant as to what transpires here now.” Boulstridge assured him. From another internal pocket, he produced a long thin cylinder and began to attach it to the muzzle of the pistol. When finished he held the gun up and looked at it appreciatively. “This is a Walther PPK. It is a German gun that only became available earlier this year. I do consider myself something of a modernist, and the Germans are such splendid engineers, aren’t they?”

“Quite, and that other device, I suspect, would be a muffler of some sort?”

“Yes, a silencer they call it. It is engineered to fit this particular gun. They say that Hiram Percy Maxim invented the silencer in the early part of this century. The Americans are also modernists in their own way. It is a remarkable device, don’t you think?”

“Not particularly, but then I’m not an assassin.”

“True!” Boulstridge shrugged his acceptance to Hunter’s rejoinder. “It does make this weapon an assassin’s gun, I suppose. Personally, I prefer to think of myself as more of a protector of my employer’s assets. There is some logic to that notion, considering the level of threat that you now represent to the Verdure, and all that they have achieved; all that they are going to achieve.”

“A threat that I have never expressed in neither word nor deed.”

“Again, true, but you are a man of principle, Dr. Hunter. You would move against them eventually. We all know that to be true.”

“I am sixty-five years old, all but retired from public life already, it would only take one more step for me to fade into the shadows, and live out the rest of my life here with my wife and family.”

“An admirable notion, but one that belies both your prodigious physical and mental capacities, even at the age you have attained. You may remain silent doctor, but I doubt very much that you would remain inactive. The Indivisibles would make of you a fine recruit.”

“I wish to escape the clutches of one secret brotherhood, why should I then seek out the embrace of another?”

“For revenge. Oh, you scowl at so base a motive, I know, but I also understand how seductive revenge can be. Perhaps tomorrow you would continue in your retirement, and perhaps all through next year as well. The Indivisibles, however, would come calling sooner rather than later, and you will be swayed by their arguments eventually, simply because they would offer you revenge in one form or

another. Given time to ponder upon what occurred when you were more amenable to the Verdure you would come to believe that they were the cause of many of your regrets in life. Vengeance in one form or another would quickly come to seem like the balm of choice for such sores. I am sorry, Doctor, truly sorry, but your fate is now to die this night.”

“Apparently, but would you grant me one last favour, Boulstridge?”

“If it is within the bounds of both reason and my capacity to do so.”

“It is only this, I notice that it wants a little of a minute to midnight. I would like to die in 1932, and upon my feet, if that is acceptable to you? Just a vanity really, but there you are.”

Boulstridge glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece to verify the time. “Well now, I have been so carried away with our conversation that I clearly lost all track of the time. It is indeed almost the dawn of a new year. Please, Doctor, rise and greet 1932 with me.” Boulstridge levelled the gun as the other rose to his feet.

Dr. Hunter placed his glass on the occasional table that stood next to his chair and put the cigar in his mouth. He glanced around his study fondly. It was a room he had come to consider as his favourite within the whole house. It held many reminders of his glittering career in science, as well as some more personal accomplishments.

Neither man spoke as the clock ticked down. All three hands eventually coincided on the numeral twelve. From below they heard a chorus of cheers followed by the singing of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ by many excited voices.

“I never placed much value on marking the New Year as such,” Boulstridge told him. “I find it all just goes on as it did before. Of course, you realise that we have searched through all of your extant documents, in all of your properties?”

“I expected as much.” Dr. Hunter removed the cigar and favoured it with an appreciative look. “I presume you were responsible for breaking into the safe here in my study.”

“Indeed, a skill I learnt in the service of my country. Now, how would you like to do this, facing that delightful Monet painting hanging over the fireplace perhaps?”

“Right here, like this is acceptable.”

“Face to face, like men, eh?”

“One moment!” Dr. Hunter held up the cigar in explanation and then indicated a heavy, cut crystal, ashtray placed on the table next to his chair. “We wouldn’t want to start a fire now, would we?” He half turned and bent down towards the table. His hand reached out with the cigar to stub out the burning tobacco. Once satisfied that it was extinguished he returned his attention back to his assassin.

“I am very sorry that it has come to this, Dr. Hunter. I have always been an admirer of yours.” Boulstridge raised the gun and sighted down its extended barrel.

“Perhaps you can express your regret to my son when he comes for you!” Dr. Hunter returned with a tone that contained a significant amount of disdain.

Boulstridge’s index finger clenched. A soft sound emitted from the gun. It was followed by the falling of a body to the carpeted floor. From below came the tinkling of a piano and several voices poorly united in song. The assassin stepped forward and put two fingers to the side of his victim’s neck, searching for a pulse. Satisfied that he had fulfilled his commission with a single bullet to the heart he rose and disassembled his weapon, stowing away the several pieces within different pockets of his jacket. He then exited the study, making sure that the door was closed, and headed down the stairs with a slight smile on his face.

At the bottom of the staircase, several people filled the hallway as they tried to don their coats and find their heads to place most carefully into their hats. Boulstridge

glided through the press of bodies. He returned a 'good evening' or a 'happy new year' to anyone who noticed him, and then passed through the front door and out into the night.

Part One

The England Internal Leg

Commencing Thursday, 1st September, 1932.

From Howden Airfield, East Yorkshire.

For an Inaugural Flight Celebrated with Aerial Photography.

Proceeding to Cardington Airfield, Bedfordshire.

Chapter One

*"Ram, ass, and horse, my Kyrnos, we look over
With care, and seek good stock for good to cover;
And yet the best men make no argument,
But wed, for money, runts of poor descent.
So too a woman will demean her state
And spurn the better for the richer mate.
Money's the cry. Good stock to bad is wed
And bad to good, till all the world's cross-bred.
No wonder if the country's breed declines-
Mixed metal, Kyrnos, that but dimly shines."*

Theognis of Megara, circa 520 B.C.

Monday, 1st September. 1932.

"Stop! Stop!" Lieutenant-Commander Buckland urgently insisted.

His wife slowed the Crossley Golden saloon car in response to his sudden excited outburst. A frown crossed her pretty face. The vehicle rolled to a stop at the side of the road, the engine ticking over. They remained some distance from Howden, in the East Riding of Yorkshire, but the great bulk of the far-off hangar could clearly be seen in the early morning light. Buckland's attention had been captured by the view, but not by the huge monolithic building that totally dominated the landscape. It was the sight of an equally massive vehicle that particularly excited him. Situated away from the huge hangar was a mooring mast that jutted up some three hundred feet into the air. It was an object of apparent frailty when compared to the behemoth that was anchored to it; the vast airship R102.

Project H had been born.

Over eight hundred feet in length and some one hundred and thirty-four feet in girth she belied her huge size by seemingly hovering effortlessly above the ground. There was something intrinsically beautiful about the classic shape of the airship. It reminded him of the great whales that he had so often seen whilst serving in the Royal Navy. He thought especially of the larger species that they had encountered in the colder waters of the South Atlantic. He could not countenance referring to it as a 'sausage', a term frequently employed by the common workmen who had constructed this beautiful vessel.

"Is that it?" His wife asked quizzically.

"Yes, what do you think?"

"Well, its size is impressive," she admitted. "One finds it difficult to imagine how such a construction could take to the air. How much does it weigh?"

"Hardly anything at all when it's full of hydrogen. It has a volume of some eight million, three hundred thousand, cubic feet. That's more than enough to carry a hundred and fifty passengers, all that's required to keep them in comfort, and then fly

to Egypt non-stop.” Her husband answered, never taking his eyes from the subject of their conversation.

“Numbers dear, just numbers to me. All I am concerned about is that you’re safe on board such a contraption.”

“It is not a contraption, it is a vessel, a ship; a ship of the air!” He told her with a smile. “That’s why they call it an airship.”

“How droll. I suppose that explains why they appoint Royal Navy officers to command such things?”

“I say, there *are* Royal Air Force officers involved in this as well.” Smythe piped up from the back seat. “The thing floats in the air, you see, not sails as such. That’s why it’s called an airship!”

“This really is the future, darling.”

“Really?” Her tone was sarcastic and her expression no less so.

“Do you know how many airship captains there are in the service at the moment? Three. Just three, and I am in line to be one of them if this voyage is successful.”

“Daddy was so impressed when you were appointed to the captaincy of a ship, a proper ship I mean, one that sails the seas and all that. I don’t know what he would have made of this?”

“The Royal Navy has plenty of officers who want to be captains of ships, but very few who countenance the command of an airship. Do you know, this beautiful vessel can sail to America in only three days? It takes eight to nine days by steamship.”

“Oh, but those ocean-going liners are so beautifully appointed.”

“So is the R102, my dear. I really will have to give you the grand tour one day.”

“But not today!” Smythe voiced his presence again.

“No, not today. Too many top brass expected today,” Buckland agreed.

“The inaugural flight and everything I suppose?” She did not seem at all disappointed.

“Not exactly, that was supposed to be some time off yet, but the politicians have a point to prove, and an impression to make. It’s a good job that they finished her well ahead of schedule.”

“It’s something to do with that Brinley Valentine Husher man isn’t it?”

“Yes, yes it is.” Buckland nodded. He looked out through the windscreen at the huge craft on which he would be serving as the first officer.

“I think he’s vile!”

“Portia! Brinley Husher is a secretary of state. He has a position of authority as the head of a new government ministry.”

“Perhaps he does, but I do not like the man. You know how he’s been going on about the infirm and the imbeciles. When I hear him I think about Sybil’s poor unfortunate little George. He’s such a sweet thing, so placid and quick to smile. What fault is it of his little heart that he was born with a cleft palate?”

“None at all I expect. In fact, I doubt very much that such children are really the concern of this new Minister for Social Biology.”

“That’s not all I have heard. There was a piece on the BBC radio about how this law that they have passed recently has given this new ministry of Husher’s the legal right to take such children into custody!” She sounded indignant.

“It isn’t custody exactly,” Smythe interjected. “I was down at the Odeon last Saturday, with Rose. We went to see *Hounds of Zaroff*, cracking good film by the way. That Fay Wray, whom you know I like, was in it.”

“I thought you liked Rose?” Portia interrupted him acidly.

“Well I do, but she likes Clark Gable, we had to go see *Red Rust* the other week. Anyway, like I was saying, we watched that Fay Wray movie, I tell you she’s going to make a monster of a film one day, and there was one of those government information films all about this new Ministry of Social Biology on just before it. They’re taking in all these imbeciles and crippled wretches, adults and children alike, because the places that they’ve been keeping them, the asylum’s and private hospitals and such, are just awful.”

“Oh I agree with you there,” Portia insisted.

“It must be better for them, I think, after what they showed in that short film. They really were dreadful looking places. I mean, it is one thing to send little Johnny Cripple to an asylum, one understands that kind of thinking, but not to a beastly hovel, surely? That’s just not Christian!”

“Perhaps you’re right? As long as such places as this Husher fellow is in charge of now promise to be something better than those that they’re closing. I can’t bear the thought of a childlike Sybil’s little George being put into somewhere beastly just because of his cleft palate.”

“I really don’t think that’s a concern for Sybil,” Smythe placated her. “They’re looking at orphans and such, kids from one parent families, and the very poor; that sort of thing.”

“I hardly imagine that Brinley Husher will concern himself with anyone from our class,” Buckland asserted. “We have the means to look after such invalids if we must.”

“And the decency to do it in privacy as well,” Portia agreed.

“And this fellow Husher is something of a war hero you know? Got blown up by artillery or something in the big one.” Smythe told them.

“Come now, we must get on or else I will be setting a poor show for the junior officers and ordinary hands.” Buckland urged them.

“Not to mention the old man. I wouldn’t expect the captain to be too late this morning, what with the bigwigs from various ministries arriving for their conference. Then there’s all those academic and scientific types as well.” Smythe added with increasing enthusiasm.

The Crossley Golden pulled away from the edge of the road and began to close on the great airship hangars at Howden. Today would be a special moment in the history of British aviation and Lieutenant-Commander Buckland intended to have a major role in it.

The Under-Secretary of State for Social Biology read once again the handwritten letter that she held before her:

Dear Miss Munroe,

You will not, I dare say, remember me and my name will mean little to you now. The best form of introduction that I can make, so as to jog your memory, is to admit the sin that I have been carrying with me all these years: I did not kill the child!

We both know that the doctor’s instruction was specific, but I am now, as I was then, a Christian and I could not break the Lord’s commandment. For me, His Word stands higher than that of any man.

*I am dying, Miss Monroe. I stand ready to go before God but before I do I must cleanse myself of this crime that some presume me to have committed. I separated mother from child on the orders of a superior, but not with the totality of death. The child yet lives, I believe. If you would be an instrument in the remaking of a Holy bond, of joining mother and child together once more, then please respond to the College of Nursing who hold my address. Do not tarry for I hear almighty God call my name!
May Jesus take you into his merciful love.
Yours truly,*

Patricia Cooper.

“You stupid bitch!”

Helene Monroe’s beautifully manicured fingers closed like talons on the letter as it hung before her face. Her attention, however, had moved on from the now often read missive. She was focusing on a particular date, the 5th June 1917. The significant event to which it was associated concerned the awful night when a monster had been born into the world.

She recalled very clearly the precise instructions given by Dr. Reece, the attending physician, to his assisting nurse, Patricia Cooper: “*Administer this!*”

He had drawn up an overdose of opiates and handed the hypodermic to the presumably trustworthy nurse while he tended to the exhausted mother. Patricia Cooper had taken the baby out of the room to perform the deed. It had seemed then that she had been ruled by some misguided notion of compassion. It had led her to presume that the mother would not want to see the new life of her deformed child ended. Nurse Cooper had engineered an unsupervised moment in which she had betrayed them all, her patient, her employer, the Verdure, everyone. In her weakness, Patricia Cooper had granted life to one not fit to live. Now the consequences of that shameful decision were to be visited upon Helene Monroe instead of the stupid woman who had committed the unpardonable offence of disobeying her superiors.

A knock at the large door to the office broke Monroe’s reverie. She settled back in her chair. Picking up the cigarette that burnt aimlessly in the silver and onyx ashtray she placed the tip of the elegant holder close to her ruby red lips. Only then did she tell the person waiting on the other side of the door to enter.

As the portal opened she glanced at the open file on her desk. Quickly she reminded herself of the salient facts about her visitor. Once done she placed a routine missive with the letterhead of the ‘Ministry of Social Biology’ on top of it. The crumpled letter from Patricia Cooper she placed to one side and did not look at it again.

Joseph Mustow wore metal heel protectors in his shoes. It was a decision that he regretted the moment he walked across the marble tiled floor of his superior’s office. The sharp staccato sound of his heels echoed off the walls. He glanced at the art deco styling, the sparse but very modern decor, trying to get an indication as to Helene Monroe’s character before they actually met for the first time.

He already knew a lot about her. It was one of his gifts and one of his obsessions also; he liked to know about people. Helene Monroe was the glamorous face of the Ministry of Social Biology. She looked like an American movie star. Her appearance was always faultless, from the blonde hair that appeared to be almost sculptured into elegant shapes, to the make-up that was never overdone. Her clothing was the height

of fashion and yet understated, except perhaps for the shoulders; she wore shoulder pads like armour. Behind the glamour, there was a shrewd mind, however. Quite obvious to the perceptive. She was, after all, a woman of authority in a male-dominated arena. Only the foolish believed the rumours that her bed was her chief attribute in getting promoted. He did not doubt that Helene Monroe used sex to get what she wanted, he just questioned if it was her first choice when she had an innate intelligence to call upon as well.

“Mr. Mustow, please be seated,” she instructed him when he finally reached her desk. Her voice was firm, her tone cultured. Feminine, but not too high in the aural register. Her face smiled but her eyes did not. He liked that.

“Many thanks.” He said what was expected of him. Seating himself he realised that his chair was a little lower than hers, and not as comfortable.

Little tricks!

“I have a delicate matter that needs looking into and when I enquired I was given your name as someone who can both be relied upon to be discreet as well as being able to get the job done.”

“I am pleased that my reputation goes before me.”

“Quite. Can you be relied upon, Mr. Mustow?”

“Yes, ma’am-”

“Ms., please!” she interrupted him, one eyebrow rising a little higher than the other as she held the cigarette holder away from her captivating face. The smoke delicately snaked its way upwards towards the high ceiling.

“Of course, Ms. Monroe. I hope that you will find me to be very reliable.”

“I do not wish to hope, Mr. Mustow, I wish to know.”

“In that case, I give you my personal guarantee: I can be relied upon both to be discreet and to get the job done, as you put it.”

Helene Monroe did not answer immediately, but instead let a cloud of cigarette smoke develop between them, blowing the fumes out from between her perfect lips. She studied him carefully through the miasma with an unwavering gaze.

Mustow was a short man with sharp features. His hair was thinning and combed over to disguise the baldness. It failed. His face had a placid aspect but his eyes were alert and indicated an intelligence that his physical presence did not communicate in any other way. Monroe guessed that this was camouflage, a means to get people to discount him out of hand, to reassure them that he posed no threat whatsoever. It was a clever ruse. Mustow dealt in information and he had carefully cultivated aspects of his character that would allow him to get physically closer to people without them necessarily even noticing him. Certainly, they would not count him as any kind of danger. He was a grey man, a shadow in the corner, one who heard everything and gave away nothing.

“Guarantee accepted,” she said eventually. “However, that said, I cannot impress upon you too greatly how delicate a matter this is. Not a word spoken here must leave this very office, understood?”

“Yes, Ms. Monroe.”

“No matter to whom you talk to in the course of your other duties.”

“I understand, Ms. Monroe.”

“Not even if the minister himself asks you.” Her face hardened and her eyes glared at his mild-mannered expression. “Do you understand?”

“Not even the minister himself,” Mustow repeated slowly.

“The task I am about to give you falls under the category of a special investigation, do you comprehend the significance of what I am telling you?”

“Yes, Ms. Monroe. Special investigations enacted by any of the under-secretaries of state are immune to normal disclosure protocols. Only you can reveal the conclusions of the proposed special investigation. I have no such authority to do so and am but the instrument of your inquiry.”

Her smile was almost imperceptible but Mustow saw it all the same and he knew then that he had made the right response. For his own part, his expression never changed either. Not a single muscle on his face betrayed the delight that he felt at being given his first special investigation case. Today, he had achieved a significant career ambition, but he looked to any other observer as nothing more than an attentive employee awaiting the directions of their superior officer.

“You inspire confidence, Mustow,” she admitted to him, having made her decision to press ahead. “Here are the facts of the case as I may present them to you. A child was deposited on the steps of an as yet unknown orphanage, in an unknown location, on the 5th of June, or thereabouts, in 1917. You will discover both the orphanage and the child. The staff will remember it, the child was severely deformed. It may have died early in life, in which case confirmation of that event is required, a death certificate obviously.”

“Obviously,” Mustow nodded his agreement.

“If the child survived then you need to ascertain its’ exact location and take it into custody, here at the Spring Bank facility would be ideal.”

“Do you have any preliminary information for me to proceed upon, Ms. Munroe?”

“Here.” She passed a slim buff folder over to him. It contained a single page of information distilled from Patricia Cooper’s letter, including the reference to the College of Nursing. “It is not much but it is a beginning.”

“That is all I need,” Mustow assured her as he glanced inside the folder. “I will travel to London on the next available train and begin my search for this Nurse Cooper there.”

“Excellent, Mustow.”

“And when I have found the child and brought it back to Spring Bank if it still lives?”

“Contact me immediately. Understand that this is a serious matter that could have undesirable ramifications for the ministry. I believed once before that it had been taken care of, but I was betrayed by someone of a weak and sentimental disposition. I cannot allow that to happen again. I will not allow that to happen again.”

“I understand, Ms. Monroe, but I feel that I must advise you, from my own capacity, not to stray too close to the object of this investigation, it could prove dangerous to you professionally.”

“I appreciate your candour, Mustow, but this is a matter that I have become personally involved in already and I must be there at the conclusion to ensure that it is done properly this time.” Her tone was inflexible.

“As you wish, Ms. Monroe. Now, as to the level of my authority?”

“Here.” Monroe handed a small leather wallet over her desk. Mustow leant forward and took it from her perfect hand. He glanced quickly inside and felt an immediate increase in his level of self-satisfaction. The wallet held a warrant card that granted him all the authority that he had ever craved to carry out the duties that particularly interested him. Along with it came permission to carry a firearm. “You may call upon either the ministry’s own constables or press the local constabulary to

your service as required, but I would rather that you did so only if absolutely necessary.”

“Discretion, Ms. Monroe, will be my watchword.”

“Then there is nothing more to discuss, Mustow, good day to you.”

“Good day to you, Ms. Munroe,” he replied as he rose from his seat.

Helene Monroe busied herself with an office memorandum as she listened to the retreating clicking of his heels on the cold, hard floor. Only when she heard the door close behind him did she look up from her desk and sit back in her chair. She retrieved the now almost totally consumed cigarette.

“Compassion will not stand between you and your death again if you still live,” she said to the letter laid upon her desk.

Chapter Two

“Every single case of inherited defect, every malformed child, every congenitally tainted human being brought into this world is of infinite importance to that poor individual; but it is of scarcely less importance to the rest of us and to all of our children who must pay in one way or another for these biological and racial mistakes.”

Margaret Sanger.
The Pivot of Civilization. 1922.

“I can see the bus, Thomas,” his mother announced in a voice that tried too painfully to be happy when it was, in truth, wracked with pain.

They stood several paces away from the other families that presumably were waiting for the same vehicle. They were not so far that they could not help but overhear the man with the red hair when he raised his voice. He was not arguing with the woman that Mrs. Morrow presumed to be his wife; rather it seemed that he was struggling to contain his emotions. He looked at the boy in the wheelchair frequently and it was clear to her that, despite his gruff demeanour, he loved his son.

Thomas heard his mother sniff again. The hand disappeared from his right shoulder as she raised a cotton handkerchief to her eyes. They were already red from tears. He was aware of her body as she stood close behind him. He felt the reassurance that she was trying to transmit to him through her very presence. He appreciated it.

The vehicle approached the small gathering. Those who could see might notice that the coach was an Albion Valiant painted green and white, the colours of the Ministry of Social Biology. The chrome work glinted in the morning sunshine. Thomas could hear its diesel engine clearly. In fact, he had heard it from some distance away, but he had not mentioned the fact, as was his habit. It did not matter if he was more able than his mother thought. She would always believe that he needed her assistance, and, actually, he did not find her consideration objectionable. He loved his mother.

The coach pulled smoothly to a stop in front of them. It was a bright and shiny modern vehicle. Pale faces of passengers already on board peered down from behind the windows. The door opened and a young woman in a smart green uniform jumped to the pavement with all the athletic agility of youth. She held a clipboard in her left hand and a sunny smile lit up her pretty face.

“Hello, everyone. Nice to see you all ready and prepared for your little holiday.” She called in greeting. Her face beamed as if this encounter was the joy of her young life. “My name is Yvonne. Now, if you can have your transit papers ready please, we can get your little darlings settled on the coach. The sooner they are ready to go the sooner we will be arriving at the wonderful new Spring Bank facility.”

It just so happened that the coach had stopped a few yards beyond where Thomas and his mother stood so that they were now first in line as a result. The young woman approached them, clipboard at the ready.

“Oh, the little blind black boy. You must be, Master Thomas Morrow?” She gushed.

Thomas could sense his mother’s tension. She hated people referring to her son’s blindness or the colour of his skin that was inherited from his father for that matter.

However, she could not be anything but polite in return to someone who was a figure of authority.

“That’s right, Thomas Morrow,” she replied with forced friendliness. “I’m his mother, Sally Morrow. I have packed a case for him.”

“Oh, wonderful, so nice to see parents able to follow the instructions that we give them.” The young woman responded. “Edgar will take care of the luggage.”

The bus driver appeared from behind Yvonne and took hold of Thomas’s small suitcase.

“I’ve put a label on it with his name and address,” Thomas’s mother told the man. He glanced at the handle and the brown label attached to it, nodded once, but said nothing in reply.

“Would you just sign this please?” The young woman smiled. Thomas’s mother glanced at the form and then at Yvonne. “Oh, it’s just to say that you have put him on the bus and handed him over to our care. It’s just a procedural thing, something that the minister himself wants us to do.”

Mrs. Morrow dutifully signed the form alongside her son’s name. Yvonne, having gotten the required signature, lost interest and moved onto the family with the red-headed boy in the wheelchair.

“Now, you behave yourself, Thomas,” Sally Morrow told him as she straightened his coat unnecessarily and ran a loving hand over his tight curly dark hair.

She looked into his unseeing eyes, dark and apparently lifeless, and found herself thinking about his father once more. She recalled his smiling face, his brilliant white teeth gleaming against his black African skin. Such a friendly smile. Such laughing eyes. Such a loving heart. John’s memory always brought her a wave of happiness, but, in the same way, it was always followed by a feeling of regret. She did not bemoan meeting him or even marrying him. Even back then she had understood that a white woman marrying a black man was always going to have a life harder than most, but he had inspired her to love and to live like no other man ever had. London had seemed like a place big enough to make such a couple unimportant to anyone else.

Was Thomas punished for the happiness of his parents?

Sally’s own mother had assured her of that fact. Together, she and Thomas had returned north to be with her family, following the unexpected death of her husband. The welcome had been frosty, to say the least. Thomas’s blindness was a cross to bear, but it did not compare to the condemnation that the colour of his skin brought. He was the little black blind boy; a child with two afflictions.

Perhaps it was a kindness that he could not see the hostility in other people’s faces when they sat in the Anglican Church on a Sunday morning, she thought once more to herself.

“I love you!” She put a hand to the side of his young face and Thomas responded by pushing his cheek into the palm of that hand.

“I love you too,” Thomas replied with a smile.

“Remember, they are going to try and make your eyes better. They are going to try and help you to see, Thomas. Won’t that be something, to come home and see my face for the first time?”

“Yes mum, but I will miss you. I’ll miss school as well. Do you think that we’ll do lessons there?”

“Of course, Thomas, they have to keep up your education. You’re so good at English, and playing music, and doing your sums. They will help you to do even

better. I will be so proud of you, Thomas. When you come home everything will be different.”

Spontaneously, he hugged her and she had to fight very hard to stifle her sobs, but he heard them all the same. For a moment he wished that he had not embraced her, but, in his heart, he knew that he had needed the contact also. He was missing her already. Deep within him, however, there was a voice, perhaps the echo of the father that he had never known but whom he knew so well through his mother’s remembrances. The voice told him to be strong and to be the man of their little family.

“I wish I could take my guitar,” he told her as they separated.

“It will be waiting for you, my darling boy,” she replied, her eyes misted with tears.

“What, still not on board? Come now, this will not do, chop chop!” Yvonne clapped her hands as an encouragement.

Thomas forced a smile and turned towards the coach. Using his white stick he tapped out the way before him and walked unerringly towards the open door. His mother followed a step or two behind him, one hand hanging expectantly at his elbow.

“I’m sorry but we cannot allow parents on board the bus,” Yvonne said and inserted her lithe frame in between the two of them. “Do you need a hand there young man?”

“No thank you, I can manage.” As if to demonstrate his confidence in his own abilities, Thomas reached up with both hands and gripped the handrails. He placed a foot on the bottom step and pulled himself up. He did the same with the next step, and so on until he was inside the vehicle.

“Goodbye, Thomas!”

“Goodbye, mum!”

He turned away from the door and began to make his way down the narrow aisle between the two columns of seats. Many of these were occupied by children who had been picked up earlier. Thomas moved towards the back, noting that some of the children seemed excited and that others were very quiet. He thought that he could hear their hearts beating in trepidation and he felt sorry for them. He wanted very much to concentrate on the happier boys and girls. His own anxiety was not that well repressed.

Eventually, he came to the penultimate row of seats and turned to his left. Someone was sat near the window but the seat next to them was vacant.

“May I sit here?” He asked politely.

The girl sat near the window had been staring out absently at the working class terraced houses opposite. She turned her head and looked at Thomas, paused for a moment, and then shrugged her shoulders in response to his question. She returned her attention to observing the totally unremarkable street outside again.

“Thank you very much,” Thomas said in a friendly tone as he sat down next to her.

The boy with the red hair who had sat patiently in the wheelchair waiting with his mother and father appeared next. He clambered up the steps of the coach using a pair of crutches. It seemed to require a great deal of effort on his part. His legs clearly offered him very little support, but he made it up to the top without mishap. He looked to be around fourteen and had a very serious expression that was made erudite by the thick glasses that he wore. The aisle was not too wide; it would require him to walk sideways with his crutches to negotiate it. Not surprisingly he chose the first vacant seat that he came to, which was nearer the front of the bus. The girl sat next to the window watched the boy on the crutches with an intense interest. She returned her

attention to the street outside once the other had sat down and disappeared from her view, however.

“My name is Thomas.” He turned his head in her direction. He had been told many times by his grandmother that this was normal between two people who were talking and who could see each other. The girl did not respond. “What’s your name?” He prompted her.

Slowly she turned her head and looked intently at him, her face expressionless. If he could have seen her then he might have noted that she had an underfed appearance, her skin sallow, and that there was a cold and unfriendly look in her eyes. She wore an old coat that had seen better days and beneath that a dress that had been washed perhaps too many times. It had also been mended in several places. Her light brown hair was cut short in a clumsy fashion, clearly done by someone lacking in the necessary skills of hairdressing. Her grey eyes seemed as lifeless as Thomas’s.

“How do you see?” She asked in a quiet voice, but one with an under-note of determination that Thomas’s developed hearing was quick to pick up on.

“I am blind,” he responded predictably but without any hint of annoyance.

“I know, but how do you see?”

“I don’t understand, what do you mean?” Normally, Thomas could maintain a demeanour of placid acceptance, but the girl’s question was one that he had not expected. No one had ever come close to his secret before, not even his own mother.

“Yes you do,” she accused him. “I saw you climb onto the bus and walk down the aisle. You did not stumble once, or bump into anything, or anyone. When you reached this seat you knew that I was sat here. You’re blind but you can see. How do you do it?” Her tone was insistent but quiet as if she did not want to share this topic with any of the other children sat near them.

“I was born blind. I am just good at getting around.”

“Yes, your eyes can’t see anything, but you see in another way. I didn’t speak to you, I didn’t make a noise, but you knew I was here. How did you know I was sat here?”

Thomas’s head lowered as he considered his position. He guessed that she would not give up on this interrogation until he gave her at least a plausible answer. The only one that he could think of right now was the truth. He had never told anyone about his secret before, but then he had never met anyone perceptive enough to even guess that he had one.

“I see with sound,” he told her in a conspiratorial tone. “It’s my secret, no one else knows, please don’t tell anyone?”

Again the girl looked at him with searching eyes as if testing the truth of what he had said simply by reading his face. “How does it work?”

“I don’t know! I just discovered it, when I was little. I found that if I made a noise it came back to me off any nearby objects. I play music, I know about tone and pitch; that might have something to do with it. If I make a noise at the right pitch then I can find things that are close to me. I know where they are, and others can’t hear me making the noise. I can even find things that are moving. I’ve become very good at it now. I don’t even have to think about making the noise anymore, I just do it.”

“But you never told anyone?”

“No, I don’t think anybody would believe me. They’d probably think that I was lying or something.”

“I believe you.” A very small smile appeared on her face. “My name’s Grace.”

“Nice to meet you, Grace.” His head rose as he spoke.

“How much can you actually see?”

“A lot, actually. I can see that you don’t have a real leg!”

There was no change in Grace’s expression, but Thomas believed that she was amazed by this revelation. Her dress hung just below her knees and her seated position would have made it almost impossible for someone with normal sight to have seen her legs and yet he had done so.

“The one on the right is different to the one on the left,” Thomas felt the need to explain. He was embarrassed now by what he had said as he knew it was not considered polite to talk about the disabilities of others. He had been showing off, that was all. “The sound comes back to me at a different pitch off different materials. Your left leg is softer, so is the sound, the right leg is much harder, so the sound is sharper.”

“Can you see shapes?”

“Yes.”

“But not colours?”

“No, not colours. There are differences in tones, shades I think, but they are difficult for me to explain as I’ve never seen colours.”

“Now children, can I have your attention please!” Yvonne called from the front of the bus. “We have picked up the last of our passengers for today and now we will be setting off for the Spring Bank facility. So, everyone sit back, be quiet, and we’ll be there lickatly split!”

“Where do you think we’re going?” Grace asked in a voice that she habitually kept quiet.

“To the new Spring Bank facility of course,” Thomas enthused. “They are going to give us medical treatments to make us all better.”

With another person, Grace might have spent a moment transfixing them with a scowl of total disbelief, but she realised that such a gesture would be wasted on a blind boy, even one who could see using sound.

“You don’t really believe that?” She inflected nothing but disdain into her voice.

“What do you mean?”

“You really believe that they are going to all this trouble, taking us from the places where we live, and sending us to an asylum to make us better?”

“Well, yes, why not?”

“This bus is full of kids, the youngest looks about twelve, the eldest sixteen. There are blind kids, deaf kids, imbeciles-”

“You shouldn’t call them that!” Thomas protested.

“Why not? It’s what the government calls them.” She remained unrepentant.

“Anyway, there’s too many different kinds of kids to make sense of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got missing limbs, my right leg and my left hand. You’ve got missing eyes, and the lad behind you has too much of everything. Can you see him?”

Thomas took a moment using his echolocation technique. He found that he had to move his head as if he were listening to something behind himself, which in fact he was, before he got an impression of who was sat on the backseat.

“He’s huge!” He admitted eventually.

“Gigantism,” Grace confirmed with confidence. “His name is Freddy and he’s over six foot tall, but do you know what?”

“What?”

“He’s like a little kid inside. He misses his mum and dad, and his brother and sister, even though none of them likely miss him at all.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because I’m good at watching people, Thomas, it’s what I do. I learnt at the orphanage to sit in the corner and watch. I figured out when people were going to do me a hard turn. I can read people like you can read sound. Freddy is a little boy in a man’s body.”

“You spoke to him?”

“He was crying when he sat down. He spoke to me, asked me for a hankie. I don’t have one but I wanted him to stop crying. I don’t like crying. I never cry. When I spoke to him he stopped, eventually. He’s alright really, just scared. A lot of the kids on this bus are scared.”

“Well, it is a bit scary, leaving home.”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never had one.”

“What about the orphanage?”

“It’s where I lived, where I grew up, but it was never my home. They often told me that.”

“Who did?”

“The staff at the orphanage. The people who worked there. They never liked me. They only liked the healthy children. Healthy children are much easier to put up for adoption you see. No one wants a crippled child.” Her voice was disturbingly lacking in emotion, no anger, no self-pity; no resentment. She spoke in a matter of fact tone as if she were just discussing a truth that she believed he already understood. “I don’t mind leaving the orphanage. It was just a cramped room that I had to share on occasion and the gammy end of everything that was given to the others first. I don’t mind leaving it at all, but I don’t think that this place will be any better.”

“You can’t know that?”

“Of course not, that’s why I said that I don’t think it will be any better. Do you listen to the radio?”

“Yes, whenever I can. I like the children’s hour, although I’m getting a bit old for it now, and on Saturdays, we listen to ‘In Town Tonight’.”

“Don’t you ever listen to the news?”

“Sometimes.”

“There have been lots of stories about this Ministry of Social Biology on the radio. They started out saying how terrible the hospitals and asylums where they kept cripples and loonies were. Then they said it was better if just one organisation took care of all of them, rather than allowing a lot of different charities and such to do it.”

“Well, that sounds like a good idea!”

“Yeah, it does. Then they started talking about how much it costs to keep cripples and loonies. They said that people like that only take and never give. Called them scroungers, said that they just lived off other people. That was the last I heard anyway, before I left the orphanage. Don’t know if we’ll get to listen to the radio when we get to this Spring Bank place.”

“I still don’t understand why you think this place will be no better than the orphanage you lived in?”

“Because I never get given anything better, only the same, or worse.” Her response struck him hard simply for the lack of emotion in her voice. She was stating a fact that was, to her at least, an absolute truth, something that she did not expect to be contradicted.

Thomas sat and thought for a moment. His body rocked to the movement of the coach as it wended its way west, out of the city. He found Grace’s total lack of

expectation for anything better in life unsettling. He knew that he had problems of his own, growing up as a boy who was both black and blind, but he had always had hope for a better future. He had never doubted it, and not only because his mother had repeatedly encouraged him to believe so. Being born blind was not as bad as having been born sighted and then going blind, he reasoned, simply because he had never known what it was to be able to see in the first place. There were other things that he could do, however. He had a good memory, he used it for doing oral mathematics and English language at school, and he had perfect pitch as well. At an early age he had sung, learnt to play his father's old guitar, and he had even been allowed to play the piano during morning assembly for his school.

He could not envision living in Grace's world where she seemed to have no expectation for things to improve, or where there was no ambition to learn something new.

"They told my mum that they were going to try and make me see," Thomas said eventually.

"But you don't really believe that, do you? They said that they would fix me but how can they? How can they give me a new leg and a new hand? All they can do is give me something better than what I already have, but that's not fixing is it? They don't want me at this new place to fix me, they want me out of sight so that I don't scare the grownups off when they come looking for a normal kid to adopt. They used to shut me in my room before, now they can just shut me away forever."

"Will they make me normal size, little blind boy?" A deep voice rumbled from the back seat. "All I want to be is normal size, so my brother and sister will play with me. They don't like me 'cos I'm big and clumsy and stupid."

Thomas felt his heart sinking by degrees. He had suspected the real reason behind why the new ministry had offered to take him in the first place, to make him a ward as they called it in the letter that his mother had received, and it had nothing to do with giving him his sight back. From an early age, he had been to see doctors who had told his mother that there was nothing that they could do about his blindness as he had been born that way. So why was the Ministry of Social Biology taking him in any way?

The presence of the other children, all apparently afflicted in different ways, had not prompted him to develop his suspicions further and he knew why; he was afraid of the real answer. If this new facility could cure so many children with so many different problems then why had they not said something about it on the radio? He had not admitted it straight away to Grace, but he was indeed an avid listener of the wireless. It was his gateway to a world of imagination and education. He knew that Grace had been telling the truth about the stories concerning the Ministry of Social Biology, how they had declared that they would be working to improve the health of the nation, and the betterment of the disabled, but they had never said how this would be achieved.

The conditions in the asylums and private hospitals had been revealed as dirty, squalid places, where the unfortunate were abandoned by resentful families who paid a pittance for the upkeep of their afflicted children, siblings, or parents even. It seemed like a good idea for one authority to take over the responsibility of the care of such people. Then the tone had changed, very subtly at first. It was then that the politicians had observed how honest, hardworking people, had to pay more and more to keep the disabled. Such people as the feeble-minded, the ministry pointed out, would not give anything back to society. They were just a drain on resources at a time

when the economy was struggling, when austerity was a way of life. Britain could do to be without such an expense in truth. The disabled were the good for nothing.

Was everyone on this bus one of those kind of people?