
Opening Extract from...

Scoop

Written by Evelyn Waugh

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EVELYN
WAUGH

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For

LAURA

Preface

This light-hearted tale was the fruit of a time of general anxiety and distress but, for its author, one of peculiar personal happiness.

Its earlier editions bore the subtitle: 'A novel about journalists'. This now seems superfluous. Foreign correspondents, at the time this story was written, enjoyed an unprecedented and undeserved fame. Other minor themes, then topical, are out of date, in particular the 'ideological war', although some parallels to it might still be found in the Far East.

At the time of writing public interest had just been diverted from Abyssinia to Spain. I tried to arrange a combination of these two wars. Of the later I knew nothing at first hand. In Abyssinia I had served as the foreign correspondent of an English daily paper. I had no talent for this work but I joyfully studied the eccentricities and excesses of my colleagues. The geographical position of Ishmaelia, though not its political constitution, is identical with that of Abyssinia and the description of life among the journalists in Jacksonburg is very close to Addis Ababa in 1935.

The most anachronistic part is the domestic scene of Boot

Magna. There are today pale ghosts of Lord Copper, Lady Metroland and Mrs Stitch. Nothing survives of the Boots. Younger readers must accept my assurance that such people and their servants did exist quite lately and are not pure fantasy. They will also find the sums of money recorded here very meagre and must greatly multiply them to appreciate the various transactions.

E. W.

Combe Florey 1963

SCOOP

BOOK ONE

THE STITCH SERVICE

One

While still a young man, John Courteney Boot had, as his publisher proclaimed, 'achieved an assured and enviable position in contemporary letters'. His novels sold fifteen thousand copies in their first year and were read by the people whose opinion John Boot respected. Between novels he kept his name sweet in intellectual circles with unprofitable but modish works on history and travel. His signed first editions sometimes changed hands at a shilling or two above their original price. He had published eight books – (beginning with a life of Rimbaud written when he was eighteen, and concluding, at the moment, with *Waste of Time*, a studiously modest description of some harrowing months among the Patagonian Indians) – of which most people who lunched with Lady Metroland could remember the names of three or four. He had many charming friends of whom the most valued was the lovely Mrs Algernon Stitch.

Like all in her circle John Boot habitually brought his difficulties to her for solution. It was with this purpose, on a biting-cold mid-June morning, that he crossed the Park and

called at her house (a superb creation by Nicholas Hawksmoor modestly concealed in a cul-de-sac near Saint James's Palace).

Algernon Stitch was standing in the hall; his bowler hat was on his head; his right hand, grasping a crimson, royally emblazoned despatch case, emerged from the left sleeve of his overcoat; his other hand burrowed petulantly in his breast pocket. An umbrella under his left arm further inconvenienced him. He spoke indistinctly, for he was holding a folded copy of the morning paper between his teeth.

'Can't get it on,' he seemed to say.

The man who had opened the door came to his assistance, removed the umbrella and despatch case and laid them on the marble table; removed the coat and held it behind his master. John took the newspaper.

'Thanks. Thanks very much. Much obliged. Come to see Julia, eh?'

From high overhead, down the majestic curves of the great staircase, came a small but preternaturally resonant voice.

'Try not to be late for dinner, Algy; the Kents are coming.'

'She's upstairs,' said Stitch. He had his coat on now and looked fully an English cabinet minister; long and thin, with a long, thin nose, and long, thin moustaches; the ideal model for continental caricaturists. 'You'll find her in bed,' he said.

'Your speech reads very well this morning.' John was

always polite to Stitch; everybody was; Labour members loved him.

'Speech? Mine? Ah. Reads well, eh? Sounded terrible to me. Thanks all the same. Thanks very much. Much obliged.'

So Stitch went out to the Ministry of Imperial Defence and John went up to see Julia.

As her husband had told him, she was still in bed although it was past eleven o'clock. Her normally mobile face encased in clay was rigid and menacing as an Aztec mask. But she was not resting. Her secretary, Miss Holloway, sat at her side with account books, bills and correspondence. With one hand Mrs Stitch was signing cheques; with the other she held the telephone to which, at the moment, she was dictating details of the costumes for a charity ballet. An elegant young man at the top of a step-ladder was painting ruined castles on the ceiling. Josephine, the eight year old Stitch prodigy, sat on the foot of the bed construing her day's passage of Virgil. Mrs Stitch's maid, Brittling, was reading her the clues of the morning crossword. She had been hard at it since half-past seven.

Josephine rose from her lesson to kick John as he entered. '*Boot*,' she said savagely, '*Boot*,' catching him first on one knee cap, then on the other. It was a joke of long standing.

Mrs Stitch turned her face of clay, in which only the eyes gave a suggestion of welcome, towards her visitor.

'Come in,' she said, 'I'm just going out. Why twenty pounds to Mrs Beaver?'

'That was for Lady Jean's wedding present,' said Miss Holloway.

'I must have been insane. About the lion's head for the centurion's breastplate; there's a beautiful one over the gate of a house near Salisbury, called Twisbury Manor; copy that as near as you can; ring up *Country Life* and ask for "back numbers", there was a photograph of it about two years ago. You're putting too much ivy on the turret, Arthur; the owl won't show up unless you have him on the bare stone and I'm particularly attached to the owl. *Munera*, darling, like tumtiddy; always a short a in neuter plurals. It sounds like an anagram; see if "Terracotta" fits. I'm *delighted* to see you, John. Where have you been? You can come and buy carpets with me; I've found a new shop in Bethnal Green, kept by a very interesting Jew who speaks no English; the most extraordinary things keep happening to his sister. Why should I go to Viola Chasm's Distressed Area; did she come to my Model Madhouse?'

'Oh, yes, Mrs Stitch.'

'Then I suppose it means two guineas. I absolutely loved *Waste of Time*. We read it aloud at Blackewell. The headless abbot is grand.'

'Headless abbot?'

'Not in Wasters. On Arthur's ceiling. I put it in the Prime Minister's bedroom.'

'Did he read it?'

'Well I don't think he *reads* much.'

'Terracotta is too long, madam, and there is no r.'

'Try hottentot. It's that kind of word. I can never do anagrams unless I can see them. No, *Twisbury*, you must have heard of it.'

'Floribus Austrum,' Josephine chanted, 'perditus et liquidis immisi fontibus apros; having been lost with flowers in the South and sent into the liquid fountains; apros is wild boars but I couldn't quite make sense of that bit.'

'We'll do it tomorrow. I've got to go out now. Is "hottentot" any use?'

'No h, madam,' said Brittling with ineffable gloom.

'Oh, dear. I must look at it in my bath. I shall only be ten minutes. Stay and talk to Josephine.'

She was out of bed and out of the room. Brittling followed. Miss Holloway collected the cheques and papers. The young man on the ladder dabbed away industriously. Josephine rolled to the head of the bed and stared up at him.

'It's very banal, isn't it, Boot?'

'I like it very much.'

'Do you? I think all Arthur's work is banal. I read your book *Waste of Time*.'

'Ah.' John did not invite criticism.

'I thought it very banal.'

'You seem to find everything banal.'

'It is a new word whose correct use I have only lately learned,' said Josephine with dignity. 'I find it applies to nearly everything; Virgil and Miss Brittling and my gymnasium.'

'How is the gymnasium going?'

'I am by far the best of my class although there are several girls older than me and two middle-class boys.'

When Mrs Stitch said ten minutes, she meant ten minutes. Sharp on time she was back, dressed for the street; her lovely face, scraped clean of clay, was now alive with interest.

'Sweet Josephine, has Mr Boot been boring you?'

'It was all right really. I did most of the talking.'

'Show him your imitation of the Prime Minister.'

'No.'

'Sing him your Neapolitan song.'

'No.'

'Stand on your head. Just once for Mr Boot.'

'No.'

'Oh dear. Well, we must go at once if we are to get to Bethnal Green and back before luncheon. The traffic's terrible.'

Algernon Stitch went to his office in a sombre and rather antiquated Daimler; Julia always drove herself, in the latest model of mass-produced baby car; brand-new twice a year, painted an invariable brilliant black, tiny and glossy as a midget's funeral hearse. She mounted the kerb and bowled

rapidly along the pavement to the corner of St James's, where a policeman took her number and ordered her into the road.

'Third time this week,' said Mrs Stitch. 'I wish they wouldn't. It's such a nuisance for Algy.'

Once embedded in the traffic block, she stopped the engine and turned her attention to the crossword.

'It's "detonated",' she said, filling it in.

East wind swept the street, carrying with it the exhaust gas of a hundred motors and coarse particles of Regency stucco from a once decent Nash façade that was being demolished across the way. John shivered and rubbed some grit further into his eye. Eight minutes' close application was enough to finish the puzzle. Mrs Stitch folded the paper and tossed it over her shoulder into the back seat; looked about her resentfully at the stationary traffic.

'This is too much,' she said; started the engine, turned sharp again onto the kerb and proceeded to Piccadilly, driving before her at a brisk pace, until he took refuge on the step of Brook's, a portly, bald young man; when he reached safety, he turned to remonstrate, recognized Mrs Stitch, and bowed profoundly to the tiny, black back as it shot the corner of Arlington Street. 'One of the things I like about these absurd cars,' she said, 'is that you can do things with them that you couldn't do in a real one.'

From Hyde Park Corner to Piccadilly Circus the line of traffic was continuous and motionless, still as a photograph,

unbroken and undisturbed save at a few strategic corners where barricaded navvies, like desperate outposts of some proletarian defence, were rending the road with mechanical drills, mining for the wires and tubes that controlled the life of the city.

'I want to get away from London,' said John Boot.

'So it's come to that? All on account of your American girl?'

'Well, mostly.'

'I warned you, before you began. Is she being frightful?'

'My lips are sealed. But I've got to get far away or else go crazy.'

'To my certain knowledge she's driven three men into the bin. Where are you going?'

'That's just what I wanted to talk about.'

The line of cars jerked forwards for ten yards and again came to rest. The lunch-time edition of the evening papers was already on the streets; placards announcing

ISHMAELITE CRISIS

and

STRONG LEAGUE NOTE

were fluttering in the east wind.

'Ishmaelia seems to be the place. I was wondering if Algy would send me there as a spy.'

'Not a chance.'

'No?'

'Foregonners. Algy's been sacking ten spies a day for weeks. It's a grossly overcrowded profession. Why don't you go as a war correspondent?'

'Could you fix it?'

'I don't see why not. After all you've been to Patagonia. I should think they would jump at you. You're sure you really want to go?'

'Quite sure.'

'Well, I'll see what I can do. I'm meeting Lord Copper at lunch today at Margot's. I'll try and bring the subject up.'

When Lady Metroland said half-past one she meant ten minutes to two. It was precisely at this time, simultaneously with her hostess, that Mrs Stitch arrived (having been obliged by press of traffic to leave her little car in a garage half way to Bethnal Green, and return to Curzon Street by means of the Underground railway). Lord Copper, however, who normally lunched at one, was waiting with some impatience. Various men and women who appeared to know one another intimately and did not know Lord Copper, had been admitted from time to time and had disregarded him. His subordinates at the Megalopolitan Newspaper Corporation would have been at difficulties to recognize the uneasy figure which stood up each time the door was opened and sat down again unnoticed. He was a stranger in these parts;

it was a thoughtless benefaction to one of Lady Metroland's charities that had exposed him, in the middle of a busy day, to this harrowing experience; he would readily, now, have doubled the sum to purchase his release. Thus when Mrs Stitch directed upon him some of her piercing shafts of charm she found him first numb, then dazzled, then extravagantly receptive.

From the moment of her entrance the luncheon party was transformed for Lord Copper; he had gotten a new angle on it. He knew of Mrs Stitch; from time to time he had seen her in the distance; now for the first time he found himself riddled through and through, mesmerized, inebriated. Those at the table, witnessing the familiar process, began to conjecture in tones which Lord Copper was too much entranced to overhear, what Julia could possibly want of him. 'It's her Model Madhouse,' said some; 'she wants the caricaturists to lay off Algy,' said others; 'Been losing money,' thought the second footman (at Lady Metroland's orders he was on diet and lunch time always found him in a cynical mood); 'a job for someone or other,' came nearest the truth, but no one thought of John Courteney Boot until Mrs Stitch brought him into the conversation. Then they all played up loyally.

'You know,' she said, after coaxing Lord Copper into an uncompromising denunciation of the Prime Minister's public and private honesty, 'I expect he's all you say, but he's a

man of far more taste than you'd suppose. He always sleeps with a Boot by his bed.'

'A boot?' asked Lord Copper, trustful but a little bewildered.

'One of John Boot's books.'

The luncheon party had got their cue.

'Dear John Boot,' said Lady Metroland, '*so* clever and amusing. I wish I could get him to come and see me more often.'

'Such a divine style,' said Lady Cockpurse.

The table buzzed with praise of John Boot. It was a new name to Lord Copper. He resolved to question his literary secretary on the subject. He had become Boot-conscious.

Mrs Stitch changed her ground and began to ask him in the most flattering way about the chances of peace in Ishmaelia. Lord Copper gave it as his opinion that civil war was inevitable. Mrs Stitch remarked how few of the famous war correspondents still survived.

'Isn't there one called Sir Something Hitchcock?' asked Lady Cockpurse. (This was a false step since the knight in question had lately left Lord Copper's service, after an acrimonious dispute about the date of the battle of Hastings, and had transferred to the *Daily Brute* camp.)

'Who will you be sending to Ishmaelia?' asked Mrs Stitch.

'I am in consultation with my editors on the subject. We think it a very promising little war. A microcosm, as you

might say, of world drama. We propose to give it fullest publicity. The workings of a great newspaper,' said Lord Copper, feeling at last thoroughly Rotarian, 'are of a complexity which the public seldom appreciates. The citizen little realizes the vast machinery put into motion for him in exchange for his morning penny.' ('Oh God,' said Lady Metroland, faintly but audibly.) 'We shall have our naval, military and air experts, our squad of photographers, our colour reporters, covering the war from every angle and on every front.'

'Yes,' said Mrs Stitch. 'Yes, yes. I suppose you will . . . If I were you I should send someone like Boot. I don't suppose you could persuade *him* to go, but someone like him.'

'It has been my experience, dear Mrs Stitch, that the *Daily Beast* can command the talent of the world. Only last week the Poet Laureate wrote us an ode to the seasonal fluctuation of our net sales. We splashed it on the middle page. He admitted it was the most poetic and highly paid work he had ever done.'

'Well, of course, if you *could* get him, Boot is your man. He's a brilliant writer, he's travelled everywhere and knows the whole Ishmaelite situation inside out.'

'Boot would be divine,' said Lady Cockpurse loyally.

Half an hour later Mrs Stitch rang up to say 'O.K., John. I think it's fixed. Don't take a penny less than fifty pounds a week.'

'God bless you, Julia. You've saved my life.'

'It's just the Stitch Service,' said Mrs Stitch cheerfully.

That evening Mr Salter, Foreign Editor of the *Beast*, was summoned to dinner at his chief's country seat at East Finchley. It was a highly unwelcome invitation; Mr Salter normally worked at the office until nine o'clock. That evening he had planned a holiday at the opera; he and his wife had been looking forward to it with keen enjoyment for some weeks. As he drove out to Lord Copper's frightful mansion he thought sadly of those carefree days when he had edited the Woman's Page, or, better still, when he had chosen the jokes for one of Lord Copper's comic weeklies. It was the policy of the Megalopolitan to keep the staff alert by constant changes of occupation. Mr Salter's ultimate ambition was to take charge of the Competitions. Meanwhile he was Foreign Editor and found it a dog's life.

The two men dined alone. They ate parsley soup, whiting, roast veal, cabinet pudding; they drank whisky and soda. Lord Copper explained Nazism, Fascism and Communism; later, in his ghastly library, he outlined the situation in the Far East. 'The *Beast* stands for strong mutually antagonistic governments everywhere,' he said. 'Self-sufficiency at home, self-assertion abroad.'

Mr Salter's side of the conversation was limited to expressions

of assent. When Lord Copper was right, he said, 'Definitely, Lord Copper'; when he was wrong, 'Up to a point.'

'Let me see, what's the name of the place I mean? Capital of Japan? Yokohama, isn't it?'

'Up to a point, Lord Copper.'

'And Hong Kong belongs to us, doesn't it?'

'Definitely, Lord Copper.'

After a time: 'Then there's this civil war in Ishmaelia. I propose to feature it. Who did you think of sending?'

'Well, Lord Copper, the choice seems between sending a staff reporter who will get the news but whose name the public doesn't know, or to get someone from outside with a name as a military expert. You see since we lost Hitchcock . . .'

'Yes, yes. He was our only man with a European reputation. *I know*. Zinc will be sending him. *I know*. But he was wrong about the battle of Hastings. It *was* 1066. I looked it up. I won't employ a man who isn't big enough to admit when he's wrong.'

'We might share one of the Americans?'

'No, I tell you who I want: Boot.'

'Boot?'

'Yes, Boot. He's a young man whose work I'm very much interested in. He has the most remarkable style and he's been in Patagonia and the Prime Minister keeps his books by his bed. Do *you* read him?'

'Up to a point, Lord Copper.'

'Well get onto him tomorrow. Have him up to see you. Be cordial. Take him out to dinner. Get him at any price. Well, at any reasonable price,' he added for there had lately been a painful occurrence when instructions of this kind, given in an expansive mood, had been too literally observed and a trick-cyclist who had momentarily attracted Lord Copper's attention, had been engaged to edit the Sports Page on a five years' contract at five thousand a year.

Mr Salter went to work at mid-day. He found the Managing Editor cast in gloom.

'It's a terrible paper this morning,' he said. 'We paid Professor Jellaby thirty guineas for the feature article and there's not a word in it one can understand. Beaten by the *Brute* in every edition on the Zoo Mercy Slaying story. And *look at the Sports Page.*'

Together, in shame, the two men read the trick-cyclist's Sports Page.

'Who's Boot?' asked Mr Salter at last.

'I know the name,' said the Managing Editor.

'The chief wants to send him to Ishmaelia. He's the Prime Minister's favourite writer.'

'Not the chap I was thinking of,' said the Managing Editor.

'Well, I've got to find him.' He listlessly turned the pages of the morning paper. 'Boot,' he said. 'Boot. Boot. Boot.

Why! *Boot* – here he is. Why didn't the chief say he was a staff man?'

At the back of the paper, ignominiously sandwiched between Pip and Pop, the Bedtime Pets, and the recipe for a dish named 'Waffle Scramble,' lay the twice-weekly half-column devoted to Nature: *LUSH PLACES edited by William Boot, Countryman*.

'Do you suppose that's the right one?'

'Sure of it. The Prime Minister is nuts on rural England.'

'He's supposed to have a particularly high-class style: "*Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the questing vole*" . . . would that be it?'

'Yes,' said the Managing Editor. 'That must be good style. At least it doesn't sound like anything else to me. I know the name well now you mention it. Never seen the chap. I don't think he's ever been to London. Sends his stuff in by post. All written out in pen and ink.'

'I've got to ask him to dinner.'

'Give him cider.'

'Is that what countrymen like?'

'Yes, cider and tinned salmon is the staple diet of the agricultural classes.'

'I'll send him a telegram. Funny the chief wanting to send him to Ishmaelia.'