
Opening Extract from...

The Absolutist

Written by John Boyne

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THE ABSOLUTIST

JOHN BOYNE

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For Con

TOMBLAND

Norwich, 15–16 September 1919

SEATED OPPOSITE ME in the railway carriage, the elderly lady in the fox-fur shawl was recalling some of the murders that she had committed over the years.

'There was the vicar in Leeds,' she said, smiling a little as she tapped her lower lip with her index finger. 'And the spinster from Hartlepool whose tragic secret was to prove her undoing. The actress from London, of course, who took up with her sister's husband just after his return from the Crimea. She was a flighty piece so no one could blame me for that. But the maid-of-all-work in Connaught Square, I rather regretted killing her. She was a hard-working girl of good Northern stock, who perhaps didn't deserve such a brutal ending.'

'That was one of my favourites,' I replied. 'If you ask me, she got what was coming to her. She read letters that were not hers to read.'

'I know you, don't I?' she asked, sitting forward now, narrowing her eyes as she examined my face for familiar signs. A sharp combination of lavender and face cream, her mouth viscous with blood-red lipstick. 'I've seen you somewhere before.'

'I work for Mr Pynton at the Whisby Press,' I told her. 'My name's Tristan Sadler. We met at a literary lunch a few months ago.' I extended my hand and she stared at it for a moment, as if unsure what was expected of her, before shaking it carefully,

her fingers never quite closing on my own. 'You gave a talk on untraceable poisons,' I added.

'Yes, I remember it now,' she said, nodding quickly. 'You had five books that wanted signing. I was struck by your enthusiasm.'

I smiled, flattered that she recalled me at all. 'I'm a great admirer,' I said, and she inclined her head graciously, a movement that must have been honed over thirty years of receiving praise from her readers. 'As is Mr Pynton. He's talked several times about trying to lure you over to our house.'

'Yes, I know Pynton,' she replied with a shudder. 'Vile little man. Terrible halitosis. I wonder that you can bear to be near him. I can see why he employed you, though.'

I raised an eyebrow, confused, and she offered me a half-smile.

'Pynton likes to be surrounded by beautiful things,' she explained. 'You must have seen it in his taste for artwork and those ornate couches that look as though they belong in the Paris atelier of some fashion designer. You remind me of his last assistant, the scandalous one. But no, there's no chance, I'm afraid. I've been with my publisher for over thirty years and I'm perfectly happy where I am.'

She sat back, her expression turning to ice, and I knew that I had disgraced myself, turning what had been a pleasant exchange into a potential business transaction. I looked out of the window, embarrassed. Glancing at my watch, I saw that we were running about an hour later than planned and now the train had stopped again without explanation.

'This is exactly why I never go up to town any more,' she declared abruptly as she struggled to open the window, for the carriage had begun to grow stuffy. 'You simply cannot rely on the railways to bring you home again.'

'Here, let me help you with that, missus,' said the young man

who had been sitting next to her, speaking in whispered, flirtatious tones to the girl next to me since we departed Liverpool Street. He stood and leaned forward, a breeze of perspiration, and gave the window a hefty pull. It opened with a jolt, allowing a rush of warm air and engine-steam to spill inside.

'My Bill's a dab hand with machinery,' said the young woman, giggling with pride.

'Leave it out, Margie,' he said, smiling only a little as he sat down.

'He fixed engines during the war, didn't you, Bill?'

'I said leave it out, Margie,' he repeated, colder now, and as he caught my eye we considered each other for a moment before looking away.

'It was just a window, dear,' sniffed the lady-novelist with impeccable timing.

It struck me how it had taken over an hour for our three parties even to acknowledge each other's presence. It reminded me of the story of the two Englishmen, left alone on a deserted island together for five years after a shipwreck, who never exchanged a single word of conversation as they had never been properly introduced.

Twenty minutes later, our train shifted into motion and we were on our way, finally arriving in Norwich more than an hour and a half behind schedule. The young couple disembarked first, a flurry of hysterical impatience and rush-me-to-our-room giggles, and I helped the writer with her suitcase.

'You're very kind,' she remarked in a distracted fashion as she scanned the platform. 'My driver should be here somewhere to help me the rest of the way.'

'It was a pleasure to meet you,' I said, not trying for another handshake but offering an awkward nod of the head instead,

as if she were the Queen and I a loyal subject. 'I hope I didn't embarrass you earlier. I only meant that Mr Pynton wishes we had writers of your calibre on our list.'

She smiled at this – *I am relevant*, said her expression, *I matter* – and then she was gone, uniformed driver in tow. But I remained where I was, surrounded by people rushing to and from their platforms, lost within their number, quite alone in the busy railway station.

I emerged from the great stone walls of Thorpe Station into an unexpectedly bright afternoon, and found that the street where my lodgings were located, Recorder Road, was only a short walk away. Upon arriving, however, I was disappointed to find that my room was not quite ready.

'Oh dear,' said the landlady, a thin woman with a pale, scratchy complexion. She was trembling, I noticed, although it was not cold, and wringing her hands nervously. She was tall, too. The type of woman who stands out in a crowd for her unexpected stature. 'I'm afraid we owe you an apology, Mr Sadler. We've been at sixes and sevens all day. I don't quite know how to explain what's happened.'

'I did write, Mrs Cantwell,' I said, trying to soften the note of irritation that was creeping into my tone. 'I said I would be here shortly after five. And it's gone six now.' I nodded in the direction of the grandfather clock that stood in the corner behind her desk. 'I don't mean to be awkward, but—'

'You're not being awkward at all, sir,' she replied quickly. 'The room should have been ready for you hours ago, only . . .' She trailed off and her forehead wrinkled into a series of deep grooves as she bit her lip and turned away; she seemed unable to look me in the eye. 'We had a bit of unpleasantness this morning, Mr Sadler, that's the truth of it. In your room. Or what was to be your room, that is. You probably won't want it

now. I know I shouldn't. I don't know what I'll do with it, honestly I don't. It's not as if I can afford to leave it unlet.'

Her agitation was obvious, and despite my mind being more or less focused on my plans for the following day, I was concerned for her and was about to ask whether there was anything I could do to help when a door opened behind her and she spun around. A boy of about seventeen appeared, whom I took to be her son: he had a look of her around the eyes and mouth, although his complexion was worse, scarred as he was by the acne of his age. He stopped short, taking me in for a moment, before turning to his mother in frustration.

'I told you to call me when the gentleman arrived, didn't I?' he said, glaring at her.

'But he's only just arrived this minute, David,' she protested.

'It's true,' I said, feeling a curious urge to jump to her defence. 'I did.'

'But you didn't call me,' he insisted to his mother. 'What have you told him, anyway?'

'I haven't told him anything yet,' she said, turning back to me with an expression that suggested she might cry if she was bullied any longer. 'I didn't know what to say.'

'I do apologize, Mr Sadler,' he said, turning to me now with a complicit smile, as if to imply that he and I were of a type who understood that nothing would go right in the world if we did not take it out of the hands of women and look after it ourselves. 'I had hoped to be here to greet you myself. I asked Ma to tell me the moment you arrived. We expected you earlier, I think.'

'Yes,' I said, explaining about the unreliable train. 'But really, I am rather tired and hoped to go straight to my room.'

'Of course, sir,' he said, swallowing a little and staring down at the reception desk as if his entire future were mapped out in the wood; here in the grain was the girl he would marry, here

the children they would have, here the lifetime of bickering misery they would inflict upon each other. His mother touched him lightly on the arm and whispered something in his ear, and he shook his head quickly and hissed at her to stay quiet. 'It's a mess, the whole thing,' he said, raising his voice suddenly as he returned his attention to me. 'You were to stay in number four, you see. But I'm afraid number four is indisposed right now.'

'Well, couldn't I stay in one of the other rooms, then?' I asked.

'Oh no, sir,' he replied, shaking his head. 'No, they're all taken, I'm afraid. You were down for number four. But it's not ready, that's the problem. If you could just give us a little extra time to prepare it.'

He stepped out from behind the desk now and I got a better look at him. Although he was only a few years younger than me, his appearance suggested a child play-acting as an adult. He wore a pair of man's trousers, a little too long for him, so rolled and pinned in the leg to compensate, and a shirt, tie and waistcoat combination that would not have seemed out of place on a much older man. The beginnings of a moustache were teased into a fearful line across his upper lip, and for a moment I couldn't decide whether in fact it was a moustache at all or simply a dirty smudge overlooked by the morning's facecloth. Despite his attempts to look older, his youth and inexperience were obvious. He could not have been out there with the rest of us, of that I felt certain.

'David Cantwell,' he said after a moment, extending his hand towards me.

'It's not right, David,' said Mrs Cantwell, blushing furiously. 'The gentleman will have to stay somewhere else tonight.'

'And where is he to stay, then?' asked the boy, turning on her, his voice raised, a sense of injustice careering through his tone.

'You know everywhere's full up. So where should I send him, because I certainly don't know. To Wilson's? Full! To Dempsey's? Full! To Rutherford's? Full! We have an obligation, Ma. We have an obligation to Mr Sadler and we must meet our obligations or else we disgrace ourselves, and hasn't there been enough of that for one day?'

I was startled by the suddenness of his aggression and had an idea of what life might be like in the boarding house for this pair of mismatched souls. A boy and his mother, alone together since he was a child, for her husband, I decided, had been killed in an accident involving a threshing machine years before. The boy was too young to remember his father, of course, but worshipped him nevertheless and had never quite forgiven his mother for forcing the poor man out to work every hour that God sent. And then the war had come and he'd been too young to fight. He'd gone to enlist and they'd laughed at him. They'd called him a brave boy and told him to come back in a few years' time when he had some hair on his chest, if the godforsaken thing wasn't over already, and they'd see about him then. And he'd marched back to his mother and despised her for the relief on her face when he told her that he was going nowhere, not yet, anyway.

Even then, I would imagine scenarios like this all the time, searching in the undergrowth of my plots for tangled circumstances.

'Mr Sadler, you'll have to forgive my son,' said Mrs Cantwell, leaning forward now, her hands pressed flat against the desk. 'He is rather excitable, as you can see.'

'It's got nothing to do with that, Ma,' insisted David. 'We have an obligation,' he repeated.

'And we would like to fulfil our obligations, of course, but—'

I missed the end of her speech, for young David had taken

me by the crook of the elbow, the intimacy of the gesture surprising me, and I pulled away from him as he bit his lip, looking around nervously before speaking in a hushed voice.

'Mr Sadler,' he said, 'might I speak to you in private? I assure you this is not how I like to run things here. You must think very badly of us. But perhaps if we went into the drawing room? It's empty at the moment and—'

'Very well,' I said, placing my holdall on the floor in front of Mrs Cantwell's desk. 'You don't mind if I leave this here?' I asked, and she shook her head, swallowing, wringing those blessed hands of hers together once again and looking for all the world as if she would welcome a painful death at that very moment over any further discourse between us. I followed her son into the drawing room, partly curious as to the measure of concern that was on display, partly aggrieved by it. I was tired after my journey and filled with such conflicting emotions about my reasons for being in Norwich that I wanted nothing more than to go directly to my room, close the door behind me, and be left alone with my thoughts.

The truth was that I did not know whether I could even go through with my plans for the following day. I knew there were trains to London at ten past the hour, every second hour, starting at ten past six, so there were four I could take before the appointed hour of my meeting.

'What a mess,' said David Cantwell, whistling a little between his teeth as he closed the door behind us. 'And Ma doesn't make it any easier, does she, Mr Sadler?'

'Look, perhaps if you just explained the problem to me,' I said. 'I did send a postal order with my letter in order to reserve the room.'

'Of course you did, sir, of course you did,' he replied. 'I registered the booking myself. We were to put you in number four, you see. That was my decision. Number four is the

quietest of our rooms and, while the mattress might be a little lumpy, the bed has a good spring to it and many of our clients remark that it's very comfortable indeed. I read your letter, sir, and took you for an army man. Was I right, sir?'

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded curtly. 'I was,' I told him. 'Not any more, of course. Not since it ended.'

'Did you see much action?' he asked, his eyes lighting up, and I could feel my patience beginning to wane.

'My room. Am I to have it or not?'

'Well, sir,' he said, disappointed by my reply. 'That's rather up to you.'

'How so?'

'Our girl, Mary, is up there at the moment, disinfecting everything. She kicked up a stink about it, I don't mind telling you, but I told her that it's my name above the door, not hers, and she'll do what she's told if she wants to keep her position.'

'I thought it was your mother's name,' I said, teasing him a little.

'Well, it's mine, too,' he snapped indignantly, his eyes bulging in their sockets as he glared at me. 'Anyway, it will be as good as new by the time she's done with it, I can promise you that. Ma didn't want to tell you anything, but since you're an army man—'

'An *ex*-army man,' I said, correcting him.

'Yes, sir. Well, I believe it would be disrespectful of me not to tell you what's gone on there and let you make up your own mind on the matter.'

I was intrigued now and a variety of possibilities came to mind. A murder, perhaps. A suicide. A straying husband caught by a private detective in the arms of another woman. Or something less dramatic: an unquenched cigarette catching flame in a wastepaper basket. A guest absconding in the night without settling his account due. More tangles. More wasteland.

'I'm happy to make up my mind,' I said, 'if only I—'

'He's stayed here before, of course,' said the boy, interrupting me, his voice growing more animated as he prepared to let me have it, warts and all. 'Mr Charters, that's his name. Edward Charters. A very respectable chap, I always thought. Works in a bank in London but has a mother somewhere out Ipswich way and goes to see her on occasion and usually comes into Norwich for a night or two before heading back to town. When he does he always stays here. We never had any problems with him, sir. A quiet gentleman, kept himself to himself. Well dressed. Always asked for number four because he knew how good the room was, and I was happy to oblige him. It's me who organizes the rooms, Mr Sadler, not Ma. She gets confused by the numbers and—'

'And this Mr Charters,' I said. 'He refused to vacate the room earlier?'

'No, sir,' said the boy, shaking his head.

'There was an accident of some sort, then? He was taken ill?'

'No, it was nothing like that, sir. We gave him a key, you see. In case he came back late. We give it to preferred clients. I allow it. It will be perfectly all right to give one to you, of course, what with you being ex-army. I wanted to join up myself, sir, only they wouldn't let me on account of—'

'Please,' I said, interrupting him. 'If we could just—'

'Yes, I'm sorry, sir. Only it's a little awkward, that's all. We're both men of the world, am I right, Mr Sadler? I can speak freely?'

I shrugged. I expected I was. I didn't know. Wasn't even sure what the phrase meant, if I was honest.

'The thing is, there was something of a commotion early this morning,' he said, lowering his voice and leaning forward in a conspiratorial fashion. 'Woke the whole bloody house up, it did. Excuse me, sir,' he said, shaking his head. 'It turned out

that Mr Charters, who we thought was a quiet, decent gentleman, was anything but. He went out last night but didn't come home alone. And we have a rule about that sort of thing, of course.'

I couldn't help but smile. Such niceties! Was this what the last four years had been about? 'Is that all?' I asked, imagining a lonely man, kind to his mother in Ipswich, who had somehow found a little female companionship for the evening, perhaps unexpectedly, and had allowed himself to be taken over by his baser instincts. It was hardly anything to get excited about, surely.

'Not quite all, sir,' said David. 'For Mr Charters's . . . companion, shall we say, was no better than a thief. Robbed him blind and when he protested held a knife to his throat and all hell broke loose. Ma woke up, I woke up, the other guests were out in the corridors in their night attire. We knocked on his door and when we opened it . . .' He looked as if he was unsure whether he should go on or not. 'We called the police, of course,' he added. 'They were both taken away. But Ma feels wretched over the whole thing. Thinks the whole place is spoiled now. Talking about selling up, if you can believe that. Moving back to her people in the West Country.'

'I'm sure that Mr Charters feels wretched, too,' I said, experiencing pangs of sympathy for him. 'The poor man. I can understand the young lady being arrested, of course, if she had become violent, but why on earth was he? Surely this is not a question of morality?'

'It is, sir,' said David, standing up to his full height now and looking positively affronted. 'It most certainly is a question of morality.'

'But he hasn't broken the law, as far as I understand it,' I said. 'I don't quite see why he should be held accountable for what is, after all, a personal indiscretion.'

'Mr Sadler,' said David calmly. 'I shall say this plain, as I think you might have misunderstood me. Mr Charters's companion was not a young lady, I'm afraid. It was a boy.' He nodded knowingly at me and I flushed a little and looked away.

'Ah,' I said, nodding my head slowly. 'I see. That.'

'So you can understand why Ma is upset. If word gets about . . .' He looked up quickly, as if he had just realized something. 'I trust you will be discreet about this, sir. We do have our livelihoods to consider.'

'What?' I asked, staring at him and nodding quickly. 'Oh yes, of course. It's . . . well, it's nobody's business but your own.'

'But it does leave the matter of the room,' he said delicately. 'And whether you wish to stay in it or not. As I say, it is being thoroughly cleaned.'

I thought about it for a moment but could see no objections. 'It really doesn't bother me, Mr Cantwell,' I said. 'I'm sorry for your difficulties and for your mother's distress, but if the room is still available for the night, I am still in need of a bed.'

'Then it's all settled,' he said cheerfully, opening the door and stepping back outside. I followed him, a little surprised by how quickly our interview had been terminated, and found the boy's mother still in place behind the desk, her eyes darting back and forth between us.

'Mr Sadler understands everything perfectly,' announced her son. 'And he would like to avail himself of the room after all. I have told him that it will be ready in an hour. I was right to do so, I presume?' He spoke to her as if he were already master of the house and she his servant girl.

'Yes, of course, David,' she said, a note of relief in her voice. 'And it's very good of you, sir, if I may say so. Would you care to sign the register?'

I nodded and leaned over the book, writing my name and

address carefully on the ledger, the ink splashing a little as I struggled to control my grip of the pen in my spasmodic right hand.

'You can wait in the drawing room, if you wish,' said David, staring at my trembling index finger and, no doubt, wondering. 'Or there's a very respectable public house a few doors down if you require a little refreshment after your journey.'

'Yes, that I think,' I said, replacing the pen carefully on the desk, aware of the mess that I had left behind me and embarrassed by it. 'May I leave my holdall here in the meantime?'

'Of course, sir.'

I leaned down and took my book from inside the bag, fastened it again and glanced at the clock as I stood up.

'If I'm back by half past seven?' I asked.

'The room will be ready, sir,' said David, leading me towards the door and opening it for me. 'And once again, please accept my apologies. The world's a funny place, sir, isn't it? You never know what kind of deviants you're dealing with.'

'Indeed,' I said, stepping out into the fresh air, relieved by the breeze that made me pull my overcoat tightly around my body and wish that I had remembered my gloves. But they were inside, in the bag, in front of Mrs Cantwell, and I had no desire to engage in any further conversation with either mother or son.

To my surprise, I realized for the first time that day that it was the evening of my twenty-first birthday. I had forgotten it entirely until now.

I made my way down the street but before entering the Carpenter's Arms public house, my eyes drifted towards the brass plaque that was nailed prominently above the door, where the words PROPRIETOR: J. T. CLAYTON, LICENSED TO SELL BEERS AND SPIRITS were etched in a black matted script.

I stopped short for a moment and stared at it, holding my breath, a sensation of dread soaring through my veins. I longed for a cigarette and patted my pockets, hoping to find the packet of Gold Flakes I had bought in Liverpool Street that morning, already knowing that they were lost, left behind on my train-carriage seat when I reached up to help the novelist with her suitcase before disembarking, and they probably lay there still, or had found their way into the pockets of another.

PROPRIETOR: J.T. CLAYTON.

It had to be a coincidence. Sergeant Clayton had been a Newcastle man, as far as I knew. His accent had certainly betrayed him as one. But had I heard that his father had been something high up at a brewery? Or was I confusing him with someone else? No, it was ridiculous, I decided, shaking my head. There must be thousands of Claytons spread across England, after all. Tens of thousands. This couldn't be the same one. Refusing to succumb to painful speculation, I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The bar was half filled with working men, who turned to glance at me for only a moment before looking away and returning to their conversations. Despite being a stranger, I felt at ease there, a contentment born out of a sense of isolated companionship. As the years have passed, I have spent far too many hours in pubs, hunched over unsteady, ale-stained tables, reading and writing, tearing at beer mats as I've raised my characters from poverty to glory while dragging others down from mansion to gutter. Alone, always alone. Not drinking too much, but drinking all the same. A cigarette in my right hand, a scorch mark or two on my left cuff. That caricature of me, writing my books in the corner snugs of London saloons, the one that irritates me so and has caused me, in later life, to rise up, bristling and whinnying in interviews like an aggravated horse, is not, in fact, a mistaken one. After all, the

clamour of the crowded public house is infinitely more welcoming than the stillness of the empty home.

'Yes, sir?' said a hearty-looking man standing behind the bar in his shirtsleeves, wiping a cloth along the countertop to remove the beaded lines of spilled beer. 'What can I get for you?'

I passed an eye across the row of taps that stood before him, some of the names unfamiliar to me, local brews perhaps, and chose one at random.

'Pint, sir?'

'Yes please,' I said, watching as he selected a glass from the rack behind him and then, in an instinctive gesture, held it by its base up to the light to examine it for fingerprints or dust marks before, satisfied, tilting it at a precise angle against the tap and beginning to pour. There were flakes of pastry in his heavy moustache and I stared at them, both repulsed and fascinated.

'Are you the proprietor?' I asked after a moment.

'That's right, sir,' he said, smiling at me. 'John Clayton. Have we met before?'

'No, no,' I said, shaking my head as I rooted a few coins out of my pocket. I could relax now.

'Very good, sir,' he said, placing the pint before me, apparently unconcerned by my question. I thanked him and made my way across to a half-empty corner of the pub, where I removed my coat and sat down with a deep sigh. Perhaps it had been for the best that my room had not been ready, I decided, staring at the dark brown ale settling in the glass before me, its frothy head winking as the tiny bubbles made their way north, anticipating as I did so the great satisfaction that first mouthful would offer me after my train journey. *I could sit here all night*, I thought. *I could become very drunk and cause a scene. The police might arrest me, lock me in a cell and send*

me back to London on the first train tomorrow morning. I wouldn't have to go through with it. The whole thing would be taken out of my hands.

I sighed deeply, dismissing the notion, and took my book from my pocket, glancing for a moment at the jacket with the feeling of safety that a set of bound-together pages has always afforded me. On that mid-September Monday of 1919, I was reading *White Fang* by Jack London. My eyes focused on the dust-jacket image: a silhouetted cub testing the air beyond some trees, the shadows of their branches suggesting a road cut deep into the heart of the mountains ahead, the full moon guiding his way forward. I turned to where my page holder rested, but before reading, I glanced again at the title page and the words inscribed there: *To my old pal Richard*, it said in black ink, the characters elegant and well formed. *No less of a mangy ol' dog than White Fang himself, Jack.* I had found the book a couple of days earlier on a stall outside one of the bookshops on Charing Cross Road and it was only when I had taken it home and opened it that I noticed the inscription. The bookseller had charged me only a ha'penny for the second-hand volume so I presumed that he had overlooked the words written inside, but I considered it a great bonus, although I had no way of knowing whether the Jack who signed himself 'Jack' was the Jack who had written the novel or a different Jack entirely, but I liked to believe that it was him. I traced my right index finger – the one whose inconsistent trembling always caused me such trouble – along the letters for a moment, imagining the great author's pen leaving its trail of ink along the page, but instead of being offered a curative through literature, which in my youthful fancy I hoped it would, my finger trembled even more than usual and, repulsed by the sight, I pulled it away.

'What are you reading, then?' asked a voice from a few tables

away, and I turned to see a middle-aged man looking in my direction. I was surprised to have been addressed and turned the novel around to face him so that he could read the title, rather than simply answering his question. 'Never heard of that one,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. 'Any good, is it?'

'Very good,' I said. 'Terrific, in fact.'

'Terrific?' he repeated, smiling a little, the word sounding unfamiliar on his tongue. 'Well, I'll have to look out for it if it's terrific. I've always been a reader, me. Mind if I join you? Or are you waiting for someone?'

I hesitated. I had thought that I wanted to be alone, but when the offer of company was made I found that I didn't mind so very much.

'Please,' I said, indicating the seat next to mine, and he slid across and placed his half-finished pint on the table between us. He was drinking a darker beer than mine and there was an odour of stale sweat about him that suggested a long, hard-working day. Curiously, it wasn't unpleasant.

'The name's Miller,' he said. 'William Miller.'

'Tristan Sadler,' I replied, shaking his hand. 'Pleased to meet you.'

'And you,' he said. He was about forty-five, I thought. My father's age. Although he did not remind me of my father in the slightest for he was of slender build, with a gentle, thoughtful air, and my father was the opposite. 'You're from London, aren't you?' he asked, sizing me up.

'That's right,' I said, smiling. 'Is it that obvious?'

'I'm good with voices,' he replied, winking at me. 'I can place most people within about twenty miles of where they grew up. The wife, she says it's my party trick but I don't think of it that way. It's more than just a parlour game to my way of thinking.'

'And where did I grow up, Mr Miller?' I asked, eager to be entertained. 'Can you tell?'