# Arthur & George

# Julian Barnes

### Arthur

A child wants to see. It always begins like this, and it began like this then. A child wanted to see.

He was able to walk, and could reach up to a door handle. He did this with nothing that could be called a purpose, merely the instinctive tourism of infancy. A door was there to be pushed; he walked in, stopped, looked. There was nobody to observe him; he turned and walked away, carefully shutting the door behind him.

What he saw there became his first memory. A small boy, a room, a bed, closed curtains leaking afternoon light. By the time he came to describe it publicly, sixty years had passed. How many internal retellings had smoothed and adjusted the plain words he finally used? Doubtless it still seemed as clear as on the day itself. The door, the room, the light, the bed, and what was on the bed: a 'white, waxen thing'.

A small boy and a corpse: such encounters would not have been so rare in the Edinburgh of his time. High mortality rates and cramped circumstances made for early learning. The household was Catholic, and the body that of Arthur's grandmother, one Katherine Pack. Perhaps the door had been deliberately left ajar. There might have been a desire to impress upon the child the horror of death; or, more optimistically, to show him that death was nothing to be feared. Grandmother's soul had clearly flown up to Heaven, leaving behind only the sloughed husk of her body. The boy wants to see? Then let the boy see.

An encounter in a curtained room. A small boy and a corpse. A grandchild who, by the acquisition of memory, had just stopped being a thing, and a grandmother who, by losing those attributes the child was developing, had returned to that state. The small boy stared; and over half a century later the adult man was still staring. Quite what a 'thing' amounted to - or, to put it more exactly, quite what happened when the tremendous change took place, leaving only a 'thing' behind - was to become of central importance to Arthur.

### George

George does not have a first memory, and by the time anyone suggests that it might be normal to have one, it is too late. He has no recollection obviously preceding all others - not of being picked up, cuddled, laughed at or chastised. He has an awareness of once having been an only child, and a



Published by Jonathan Cape

knowledge that there is now Horace as well, but no primal sense of being disturbingly presented with a brother, no expulsion from paradise. Neither a first sight, nor a first smell: whether of a scented mother or a carbolicy maidof- all-work.

He is a shy, earnest boy, acute at sensing the expectations of others. At times he feels he is letting his parents down: a dutiful child should remember being cared for from the first. Yet his parents never rebuke him for this inadequacy. And while other children might make good the lack - might forcibly install a mother's doting face or a father's supporting arm in their memories - George does not do so. For a start, he lacks imagination. Whether he has never had one, or whether its growth has been stunted by some parental act, is a question for a branch of psychological science which has not yet been devised. George is fully capable of following the inventions of others - the stories of Noah's Ark, David and Goliath, the Journey of the Magi - but has little such capacity himself.

He does not feel guilty about this, since his parents do not regard it as a fault in him. When they say that a child in the village has 'too much imagination', it is clearly a term of dispraise. Further up the scale are 'tellers of tall stories' and 'fibbers'; by far the worst is the child who is 'a liar through and through' - such are to be avoided at all costs. George himself is never urged to speak the truth: this would imply that he needs encouragement. It is simpler than this: he is expected to tell the truth because at the Vicarage no alternative exists.

'I am the way, the truth and the life ': he is to hear this many times on his father's lips. The way, the truth and the life. You go on your way through life telling the truth. George knows that this is not exactly what the Bible means, but as he grows up this is how the words sound to him.

**Arthur**

For Arthur there was a normal distance between home and church; but each place was filled with presences, with stories and instructions. In the cold stone church where he went once a week to kneel and pray, there was God and Jesus Christ and the Twelve Apostles and the Ten Commandments and the Seven Deadly Sins. Everything was very orderly, always listed and numbered, like the hymns and the prayers and the verses of the Bible.

He understood that what he learned there was the truth; but his imagination preferred the different, parallel version he was taught at home. His mother's stories were also about far distant times, and also designed to teach him the distinction between right and wrong. She would stand at the kitchen range, stirring the porridge, tucking her hair back behind her ears as she did so; and he would wait for the moment when she would tap the stick against the pan, pause, and turn her round, smiling face towards him. Then her grey eyes would hold him, while her voice made a moving curve in the air, swooping up and down, then slowing almost to a halt as she reached the part of the tale he could scarcely endure, the part where exquisite torment or joy awaited not just hero and heroine, but the listener as well.



Published by Jonathan Cape

'And then the knight was held over the pit of writhing snakes, which hissed and spat as their twining lengths ensnared the whitening bones of their previous victims . . .'

'And then the black-hearted villain, with a hideous oath, drew a secret dagger from his boot and advanced towards the defenceless . . .'

'And then the maiden took a pin from her hair and the golden tresses fell from the window, down, down, caressing the castle walls until they almost reached the verdant grass on which he stood . . .'

Arthur was an energetic, headstrong boy who did not easily sit still; but once the Mam raised her porridge stick he was held in a state of silent enchantment- as if a villain from one of her stories had slipped a secret herb into his food. Knights and their ladies then moved about the tiny kitchen; challenges were issued, quests miraculously fulfilled; armour clanked, chain mail rustled, and honour was always upheld.

These stories were connected, in a way that he did not at first understand, with an old wooden chest beside his parents' bed, which held the papers of the family's descent. Here were different kinds of stories, which more resembled school homework, about the ducal house of Brittany, and the Irish branch of the Percys of Northumberland, and someone who had led Pack's Brigade at Waterloo, and was the uncle of the white, waxen thing he never forgot. And connected to all this were the private lessons in heraldry his mother gave him. From the kitchen cupboard the Mam would pull out large sheets of cardboard, painted and coloured by one of his uncles in London. She would explain the coats of arms, then instruct him in his turn: 'Blazon me this shield!' And he would have to reply, as with multiplication tables: chevrons, estoiles, mullets, cinquefoils, crescents argent, and their glittering like.

At home he learned extra commandments on top of the ten he knew from church. 'Fearless to the strong; humble to the weak', was one, and 'Chivalry towards women, of high and low degree.' He felt them to be more important, since they came directly from the Mam; they also demanded practical implementation. Arthur did not look beyond his immediate circumstances. The flat was small, money short, his mother overworked, his father erratic. Early on he made a childhood vow and vows, he knew, were never to be swerved from: 'When you are old, Mammie, you shall have a velvet dress and gold glasses and sit in comfort by the fire.' Arthur could see the beginning of the story - where he was now - and its happy end; only the middle was for the moment lacking.

He searched for clues in his favourite author, Captain Mayne Reid. He looked in The Rifle Rangers: or Adventures of an Officer in Southern Mexico. He read The Young Voyageurs and The War Trail and The Headless Horseman. Buffaloes and Red Indians were now mixing in his head with chain-mailed knights and the infantrymen of Pack's Brigade. His favourite Mayne Reid of all was The Scalp-Hunters: or Romantic Adventures in Southern Mexico. Arthur did not as yet know how the gold glasses and velvet



Published by Jonathan Cape

dress were to be obtained; but he suspected it might involve a hazardous journey to Mexico.

**George**

His mother takes him once a week to visit Great-Uncle Compson. He lives not far away, behind a low granite kerb which George is not allowed to cross. Every week they renew his jug of flowers. Great Wyrley was Uncle Compson's parish for twenty-six years; now his soul is in Heaven while his body remains in the churchyard. Mother explains this as she takes out the shrivelled stems, throws away the smelly water, and stands up the fresh, smooth flowers. Sometimes George is allowed to help her pour in the clean water. She tells him that excessive mourning is unChristian, but George does not understand this.

After Great-Uncle 's departure for Heaven, Father took his place. One year he married Mother, the next he obtained his parish, and the next George was born. This is the story he has been told, and it is clear and true and happy, as everything ought to be. There is Mother, who is constantly present in his life, teaching him his letters, kissing him goodnight; and Father, who is often absent because he is visiting the old and the sick, or writing his sermons, or preaching them. There is the Vicarage, the church, the building where Mother teaches Sunday school, the garden, the cat, the hens, the stretch of grass they cross between the Vicarage and the church, and the churchyard. This is George 's world, and he knows it well.

Inside the Vicarage, everything is quiet. There are prayers, books, needlework. You do not shout, you do not run, you do not soil yourself. The fire is sometimes noisy, so are the knives and forks if you do not hold them properly; so is his brother Horace when he arrives. But these are the exceptions in a world which is both peaceful and reliable. The world beyond the Vicarage seems to George filled with unexpected noise and unexpected happenings. When he is four, he is taken for a walk in the lanes and introduced to a cow. It is not the size of the beast that alarms him, nor the swollen udders wobbling in his eye-line, but the sudden hoarse bellow the thing utters for no good reason. It can only be in a very bad temper. George bursts into tears, while his father punishes the cow by hitting it with a stick. Then the animal turns sideways, raises its tail and soils itself. George is transfixed by this outpouring, by the strange splatty noise as it lands on the grass, by the way things have suddenly slipped out of control. But his mother's hand pulls him away before he can consider it further.

It is not just the cow - or the cow's many friends like the horse, the sheep and the pig - that renders George suspicious of the world beyond the Vicarage wall. Most of what he hears about it makes him anxious. It is full of people who are old, and sick, and poor, all of which are bad things to be, judging from Father's attitude and lowered voice when he returns; and people called pit widows, which George does not understand. There are boys beyond the wall who are fibbers and, worse than that, liars through and through. There is also something called a Colliery nearby, which is where the coal in the grate comes from. He is not sure he likes coal. It is smelly and



Published by Jonathan Cape

dusty and noisy when poked, and you are told to keep away from its flames; also, it is brought to the house by large fierce men in leather helmets which carry on down their backs. When the outside world brings the door-knocker down, George usually jumps. All things considered, he would prefer to stay here, inside, with Mother, with his brother Horace and new sister Maud, until it is time for him to go to Heaven and meet Great-Uncle Compson. But he suspects that this will not be allowed.

**Arthur**

They were always moving: half a dozen times in Arthur's first ten years. The flats seemed to get smaller as the family grew larger. Apart from Arthur, there was his older sister Annette, his younger sisters Lottie and Connie, his little brother Innes, and then, later, his sisters Ida and Julia, known as Dodo. Their father was good at engendering children - there were another two who had not survived - but less good at providing for them. This early realization that his father would never furnish the Mam with the proper comforts of old age made Arthur all the more determined to provide them himself.

His father - Dukes of Brittany aside - came from an artistic family. He had talent and fine religious instincts; but was highly strung, and his constitution was not robust. He had come to Edinburgh from London at the age of nineteen; an assistant surveyor in Scotland's Board of Works, he was precipitated at too early an age into a society which, though kindly, was often rough and hard-drinking. He did not progress at the Board of Works, nor at George Waterman & Sons, the lithographic printers. He was a gentle failure of a man, with a soft face behind a full, soft beard; he perceived duty distantly, and had lost his way in life.

He was never violent or aggressive; he was a drunkard of the sentimental, open-pursed, self-pitying kind. He would be brought home, dribbling into his beard, by cabmen whose insistence on being paid would wake the children; the next morning he would lament at maudlin length his inability to support those he loved so tenderly. One year Arthur was sent away to lodgings rather than witness a new stage of his father's decline; but he saw enough to endorse his crescent understanding of what a man could or should be. In his mother's tales of chivalry and romance there were few parts for drunken illustrators.

Arthur's father painted in watercolour, and always intended to supplement his income by selling his work. But his generous nature constantly intervened; he gave his pictures away to all-comers, or at best accepted a few pence for them. His subjects could be wild and fearsome, and often gave evidence of his natural humour. But what he liked to paint best, and was most remembered for painting, was fairies.



Published by Jonathan Cape

**George**

George is sent to the village school. He wears a deep starched collar with a loose bow tie to hide the stud, a waistcoat which buttons up to just below the tie, and a jacket with high, almost horizontal lapels. Other boys are not so neat: some wear rough, home-knitted jerseys or ill-fitting jackets passed on from elder brothers. A few have starched collars, but only Harry Charlesworth wears a tie as George does.

His mother has taught him his letters, his father simple sums. For the first week he finds himself seated at the rear of the classroom. On Friday they will be tested and rearranged by intelligence: clever boys will sit at the front, stupid boys at the back; the reward for progress being to find yourself closer to the master, to the seat of instruction, to knowledge, to truth. This is Mr Bostock, who wears a tweed jacket, a woollen waistcoat, and a shirt-collar whose points are pulled in behind his tie by a gold pin. Mr Bostock carries a brown felt hat at all times and places it on the desk during class, as if he does not trust it out of his sight.

When there is a break between lessons the boys go outside into what is called the yard, but which is merely a trampled area of grass looking across open fields towards the distant Colliery. Boys who already know one another instantly start fighting, just for something to do. George has never seen boys fight before. As he watches, Sid Henshaw, one of the rougher boys, comes and stands in front of him. Henshaw makes monkey faces, pulling at the sides of his mouth with his little fingers while using his thumbs to flap his ears forward.

'How d'you do, my name's George.' This is what he has been instructed to say. But Henshaw just carries on making gurgling noises and flapping his ears.

Some of the boys come from farms, and George thinks they smell of cows. Others are miners' sons, and seem to talk differently. George learns the names of his schoolfellows: Sid Henshaw, Arthur Aram, Harry Boam, Horace Knighton, Harry Charlesworth, Wallie Sharp, John Harriman, Albert Yates . . .

His father says that he is going to make friends, but he is not sure how this is done. One morning Wallie Sharp comes up behind him in the yard and whispers,

'You're not a right sort.'

George turns round. 'How d'you do, my name's George,' he repeats.

At the end of the first week Mr Bostock tests them at reading, spelling and sums. He announces the results on Monday morning, and then they move desks. George is good at reading from the book in front of him, but his spelling and sums let him down. He is told to remain at the back of the form. He does no better the next Friday, and the one after that. By now he finds himself surrounded by farm boys and mine boys who don't care where they

sit, indeed think it an advantage to be farther away from Mr Bostock so they can misbehave. George feels as if he is being slowly banished from the way, the truth and the life.

Mr Bostock stabs at the blackboard with a piece of chalk. 'This, George, plus this' (stab) 'equals what?' (stab stab).

Everything in his head is a blur, and George guesses wildly. 'Twelve,' he he says, or 'Seven and a half.' The boys at the front laugh, and then the farm boys join in when they realize he is wrong.

Mr Bostock sighs and shakes his head and asks Harry Charlesworth, who is always in the front row and has his hand up all the time.

'Eight,' Harry says, or 'Thirteen and a quarter,' and Mr Bostock moves his head in George 's direction, to show how stupid he has been.

One afternoon, on his way back to the Vicarage, George soils himself. His mother takes off his clothes, stands him in the bath, scrubs him down, dresses him again and takes him to Father. But George is unable to explain to his father why, though he is nearly seven years old, he has behaved like a baby in napkins.

This happens again, and then again. His parents do not punish him, but their evident disappointment in their first-born - stupid at school, a baby on the way home - is as bad as any punishment. They discuss him over the top of his head.

'The child gets his nerves from you, Charlotte.'

'In any event, it cannot be teething.'

'We can rule out cold, since we are in September.'

'And indigestible items of food, since Horace is not affected.'

'What remains?'

'The only other cause the book suggests is fright.'

'George, are you frightened of something?'

George looks at his father, at the shiny clerical collar, at the broad, unsmiling face above it, the mouth which speaks the frequently incomprehensible truth from the pulpit of St Mark's, and the black eyes which now command the truth from him. What is he to say? He is frightened of Wallie Sharp and Sid Henshaw and some others, but that would be telling on them. In any case, it is not what he fears most. Eventually he says, 'I'm frightened of being stupid.'

'George,' his father replies, 'we know you are not stupid. Your mother and I have taught you your letters and your sums. You are a bright boy. You can do sums at home but not at school. Can you tell us why?'

'No.'

'Does Mr Bostock teach them differently?'

'No, Father.'

'Do you stop trying?'

'No, Father. I can do them in the book but I can't do them on the board.'

'Charlotte, I think we should take him into Birmingham.'

**Arthur**

Arthur had uncles who watched their brother's decline and pitied his family. Their solution was to send Arthur to be schooled by the Jesuits in England. Aged nine, he was put on the train at Edinburgh and wept all the way to Preston. He would spend the next seven years at Stonyhurst, except for six weeks each summer, when he returned to the Mam and to his occasional father.

These Jesuits had come over from Holland, bringing their curriculum and methods of discipline with them. Education comprised seven classes of knowledge - elements, figures, rudiments, grammar, syntax, poetry and rhetoric - with one year allotted to each. There was the usual public-school routine of Euclid, algebra and the classics, whose truths were endorsed by emphatic beatings. The instrument deployed - a piece of India rubber the size and thickness of a boot sole - had also come over from Holland, and was known as the Tolley. One blow on the hand, delivered with full Jesuitical intent, was enough to cause the palm to swell and change colour. The normal punishment for larger boys consisted of nine blows on each hand. Afterwards, the sinner could barely turn the doorknob of the study in which he had been beaten.

The Tolley, it was explained to Arthur, had received its name as a Latin pun. Fero, I bear. Fero, ferre, tuli, latum. Tuli, I have borne, the Tolley is what we have borne, yes?

The humour was as rough as the punishments. Asked how he saw his future, Arthur admitted that he had thought of becoming a civil engineer.

'Well, you may be an engineer,' replied the priest, 'but I don't think you'll ever be a civil one.'

Arthur developed into a large, boisterous youth, who found consolation in the school library and happiness on the cricket field. Once a week the boys were set to write home, which most regarded as a further punishment, but



Published by Jonathan Cape

Arthur viewed as a reward. For that hour he would pour out everything to his mother. There may have been God, and Jesus Christ, and the Bible, and the Jesuits, and the Tolley, but the authority he most believed in and submitted to was his small, commanding Mam. She was an expert in all matters, from underclothing to hellfire. 'Wear flannel next to your skin,' she advised him, 'and never believe in eternal punishment.'

She had also, less deliberately, taught him a way to popularity. Early on, he began telling his fellow pupils the stories of chivalry and romance he had first heard from beneath a raised porridge stick. On wet half-holidays, he would stand on a desk while his audience squatted around him. Remembering the Mam's skills, he knew how to drop his voice, how to drag out a story, how to leave off at a perilous, excruciating moment with the promise of more the next day. Being large and hungry, he would accept a pastry as the basic price of a tale. But sometimes, he might stop dead at the thrill of a crisis, and could only be got going again at the cost of an apple.

Thus he discovered the essential connection between narrative and reward.

**George**

The oculist does not recommend spectacles for young children. It is better to let the boy's eyes adjust naturally over the years. In the meanwhile, he should be moved to the front of the classroom. George leaves the farm boys behind and is placed beside Harry Charlesworth, who is regularly top in tests. School now makes sense to George; he can see where Mr Bostock's chalk is stabbing, and he never again soils himself on the way home.

Sid Henshaw carries on making monkey faces, but George barely notices. Sid Henshaw is just a stupid farm boy who smells of cows and probably cannot even spell the word.

One day, Henshaw rushes at George in the yard, barges him with his shoulder, and as George is recovering himself, pulls off his bow tie and runs away. George hears laughter. Back in the classroom, Mr Bostock asks where his tie has got to.

This presents George with a problem. He knows it is wrong to get a schoolfellow into trouble. But he knows it is worse to tell lies. His father is quite clear about this. Once you start telling lies you are led into the paths of sin and nothing will stop you until the hangman slips a noose around your neck. No one has said as much, but this is what George has understood. So he cannot lie to Mr Bostock. He looks for a way out - which is perhaps bad enough anyway, the start of a lie - and then he simply answers the question.

'Sid Henshaw knocked me and took it.'

Mr Bostock leads Henshaw out by the hair, beats him until he howls, comes back with George 's tie, and gives the class a lecture about theft. After school, Wallie Sharp stands in George 's path and as he steps round him says, 'You're not a right sort.'



Published by Jonathan Cape

George rules out Wallie Sharp as a possible friend.

He rarely feels the lack of what he does not have. The family takes no part in local society, but George cannot imagine what this might involve, let alone what the reason for their unwillingness, or failure, might be. He himself never goes to other boys' houses, so cannot judge how things are conducted elsewhere. His life is sufficient unto itself. He has no money, but also no need of it, and even less when he learns that its love is the root of all evil. He has no toys, but does not miss them. He lacks the skill and eyesight for games; he has never even jumped a hopscotch grid, while a thrown ball makes him flinch. He is happy to play fraternally with Horace, more gently with Maud, and more gently still with the hens.

He is aware that most boys have friends - there are David and Jonathan in the Bible, and he has watched Harry Boam and Arthur Aram huddling at the edge of the yard and showing one another things from their pockets - but he never finds this happening to himself. Is he meant to do something, or are they meant to do something? In any case, though he wants to please Mr Bostock, he is not especially interested in pleasing the boys who sit behind him.

When Great-Aunt Stoneham comes to tea, as she does on the first Sunday of each month, she scrapes her cup noisily across its saucer and through a wrinkled mouth asks him about his friends.

'Harry Charlesworth,' he always replies. 'He sits next to me.'

The third time he gives her the same reply, she puts her cup noisily back in its saucer, frowns, and asks, 'Anyone else?'

'The rest of them are just smelly farm boys,' he replies.

From the way Great-Aunt Stoneham looks at Father, he knows he has said something wrong. Before supper, he is called into the study. His father stands at his desk, with all the authority of the faith shelved behind him.

'George, how old are you?'

This is how conversations often begin with Father. They both of them already know the answer, but George still has to give it.

'Seven, Father.'

'That is an age by which a certain intelligence and judgement may reasonably be expected. So let me ask you this, George. Do you think that in the eyes of God you are more important than boys who live on farms?'

George can tell that the correct answer is No, but is reluctant to give it immediately. Surely a boy who lives in the Vicarage, whose father is the Vicar and whose great-uncle has been Vicar as well, is more important to



Published by Jonathan Cape

God than a boy who never goes to church and is stupid and also cruel like Harry Boam?

'No,' he says.

'And why do you call these boys smelly?'

It is less clear what the correct answer to this might be. George considers the matter. The correct answer, he has been taught, is the truthful one.

'Because they are, Father.'

His father sighs. 'And if they are, George, why are they?'

'Why are they what, Father?'

'Smelly.'

'Because they do not wash.'

'No, George, if they are smelly, it is because they are poor. We are fortunate enough to be able to afford soap, and fresh linen, and to have a bathroom, and not to live in close proximity with beasts. They are the humble of the earth. And tell me this, whom does God love more, the humble of the earth or those who are filled with wrongful pride?'

This is an easier question, even if George doesn't particularly agree with the answer. 'The humble of the earth, Father.'

'Blessed are the meek, George. You know the verse.'

'Yes, Father.'

But something in George resists this conclusion. He does not think Harry Boam and Arthur Aram are meek. Nor can he believe it to be part of God's eternal plan for His creation that Harry Boam and Arthur Aram shall end up inheriting the earth. That would scarcely conform to George 's sense of justice. They are just smelly farm boys, after all.

**Arthur**

Stonyhurst offered to remit Arthur's school fees if he was prepared to train for the priesthood; but the Mam declined the proposal. Arthur was ambitious and well capable of leadership, already marked down as a future Captain of Cricket. But she did not foresee any child of hers as a spiritual guide. Arthur, for his part, knew that he could not possibly supply the promised gold glasses and velvet dress and seat by the fire if he vowed himself to a life of poverty and obedience.

The Jesuits were not bad fellows, in his assessment. They considered human nature to be essentially weak, and their mistrust seemed justified to Arthur:

you only had to look at his own father. They also understood that sinfulness began early. Boys were never permitted to be alone together; masters always accompanied them on walks; and every night a shadowy figure would perambulate the dormitories. Constant surveillance might undermine self-respect and self-help; but the immorality and beastliness rife at other schools were kept to a minimum.

Arthur believed, in a general way, that God existed, that boys were tempted by sin, and that the Fathers were right to beat them with the Tolley. When it came to particular articles of faith, he argued in private with his friend Partridge. He had been impressed by Partridge when, standing at second slip, he had taken a blinding catch from one of Arthur's fastest deliveries, pocketed the ball quicker than the eye could see, and turned away, pretending to watch the ball disappear to the boundary. Partridge liked to bamboozle a fellow, and not just on the cricket field.

'Are you aware that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception became an article of faith as recently as 1854?'

'Somewhat late in the day, I'd have thought, Partridge.'

'Imagine. The Church has been debating the matter for centuries, and all that time it has never been heresy to deny the Virgin Birth. Now it is.'

'Hmm.'

'Now why should it suddenly decide to downgrade the exact nature of Joseph's participation in the matter?'

'I say, steady on, man.'

But Partridge was already addressing the doctrine of Papal Infallibility, pronounced only five years previously. Why should all the popes of centuries past be implicitly declared fallible, and all popes present and future the opposite? Why indeed, Arthur echoed. Because, Partridge rejoined, it was more a question of Church politics than theological advance. It was all to do with the presence of influential Jesuits high up in the Vatican.

'You are sent to tempt me,' Arthur would sometimes reply.

'On the contrary. I am here to strengthen your faith. Thinking for ourselves within the Church is the path of true obedience. Whenever the Church feels threatened, it responds by imposing stricter discipline. It works in the short term, but not in the long. It's like the Tolley. You are beaten today, and so you do not offend again tomorrow or the next day. But not offending for the rest of your life because of a memory of the Tolley is a nonsense, is it not?'

'Not if it works.'

'But in a year or two we shall be quit of this place. The Tolley will not exist any more. We need to be equipped to resist sin and crime by rational argument, not the fear of physical pain.'



Published by Jonathan Cape

'I doubt rational argument will work on some boys.'

'Then the Tolley by all means. And the same in the world outside. Of course there must be prison, and hard labour, and the hangman.'

'But what is the Church threatened by? It seems strong to me.'

'By science. By the spread of sceptical teaching. By the loss of the Papal States. By the loss of political influence. By the prospect of the twentieth century.'

'The twentieth century.' Arthur mused on this a moment. 'I cannot think that far. I shall be forty by the time the next century begins.'

'And captain of the England team.'

'I doubt it, Partridge. But not a priest, at any rate.'

Arthur was not exactly conscious of his faith weakening. But thinking for himself within the Church slipped easily into thinking for himself outside it. He found that his reason and conscience did not always accept what was placed in front of them. In his last year at school, Father Murphy came to preach. High in the pulpit, fierce and red-faced, the priest threatened sure and certain damnation for all who remained outside the Church. Whether their exclusion came from wickedness, wilfulness or mere ignorance, the consequences were the same: sure and certain damnation for all eternity. There followed a panoramic description of the torments and desolations of Hell, especially designed to make boys squirm; but Arthur had stopped attending. The Mam had told him what was the case; and he now gazed up at Father Murphy as at a storyteller he no longer believed.

**George**

Mother teaches Sunday school in the building next door to the Vicarage. Its brickwork has a diamond pattern to it which Mother says reminds her of a Fair Isle comforter. George does not understand this, though wonders if it has anything to do with Job's comforters. He looks forward to Sunday school all week. The rough boys do not attend: they are running wild in the fields, trapping rabbits, telling lies, and generally going down the primrose path to everlasting damnation. Mother has warned him that in class she will treat him exactly the same as everyone else. George understands why: because she is showing them all - equally - the way to Heaven.

She tells them exciting stories which George can follow easily: like Daniel in the Lions' Den, and the Burning Fiery Furnace. But other stories prove more difficult. Christ taught in Parables, and George finds he does not like Parables. Take the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. George understands the part about the enemy planting Tares among the Wheat, and how you shouldn't gather up the Tares in case you root out the Wheat at the same time - though he isn't entirely sure about this, because he often sees Mother



Published by Jonathan Cape

weeding in the Vicarage garden and what is weeding except gathering up the Tares before they and the Wheat are fully grown? But even ignoring this problem, he can go no further. He knows the story is all about something else - that is why it is a Parable - but what this something else might be his mind will not reach to.

He tells Horace about the Wheat and the Tares, but Horace does not even understand what Tares are. Horace is three years younger than George, and Maud is three years younger than Horace. Maud, being a girl, and also being the youngest child, is not as strong as the two boys, who are told it is their duty to protect her. Quite what this involves is left unspecified; it seems to consist mainly of not doing things - not poking her with sticks, not pulling her hair, and not making noises in her face as Horace likes doing.

But George and Horace prove inadequate at protecting Maud. The doctor's visits begin, and his regular inspections cast the family into a state of anxiety. George feels guilty whenever the doctor calls, and stays out of the way, in case he is identified as the prime cause of his sister's illness. Horace feels no such guilt, and cheerfully asks if he may carry the doctor's bag upstairs.

When Maud is four, it is decided that she is too frail to be left on her own all night, and that neither George nor Horace, nor even the combination of the two, can be trusted with her nocturnal care. From now on she will sleep in their mother's room. At the same time, it is decided that George will sleep with his father, and Horace will have the nursery to himself. George is now ten, and Horace seven; perhaps it is thought that the age of sinfulness is approaching, and the two boys should not be left alone together. No explanation is given, and none is sought. George does not ask whether being put to sleep in his father's room is a punishment or a reward. It is how things are, which is all there is to be said.

George and his father pray together, kneeling side by side on the scrubbed boards. Then George climbs into bed while his father locks the door and turns out the light. As he falls asleep, George sometimes thinks of the floor, and how his soul must be scrubbed just as the boards are scrubbed.

Father is not an easy sleeper, and has a tendency to groan and wheeze. Sometimes, in the early morning, when dawn is beginning to show at the edges of the curtains, Father will catechize him.

'George, where do you live?'

'The Vicarage, Great Wyrley.'

'And where is that?'

'Staffordshire, Father.'

'And where is that?'

'The centre of England.'



Published by Jonathan Cape

'And what is England, George?'

'England is the beating heart of the Empire, Father.'

'Good. And what is the blood that flows through the arteries and veins of the Empire to reach even its farthest shore?'

'The Church of England.'

'Good, George.'

And after a while Father begins to groan and wheeze again. George watches the outline of the curtain harden. He lies there thinking of arteries and veins making red lines on the map of the world, linking Britain to all the places coloured pink: Australia and India and Canada and islands dotted everywhere. He thinks of tubes being laid along the bed of the ocean like telegraph cables. He thinks of blood bubbling through these tubes and emerging in Sydney, Bombay, Cape Town. Bloodlines, that is a word he has heard somewhere. With the pulse of blood in his ears, he begins to fall asleep again.