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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Sunshine on Scotland Street**

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

Published by Polygon

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First published in Great Britain in 2012 by  
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd  
West Newington House  
10 Newington Road  
Edinburgh  
EH9 1QS

[www.polygonbooks.co.uk](http://www.polygonbooks.co.uk)

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9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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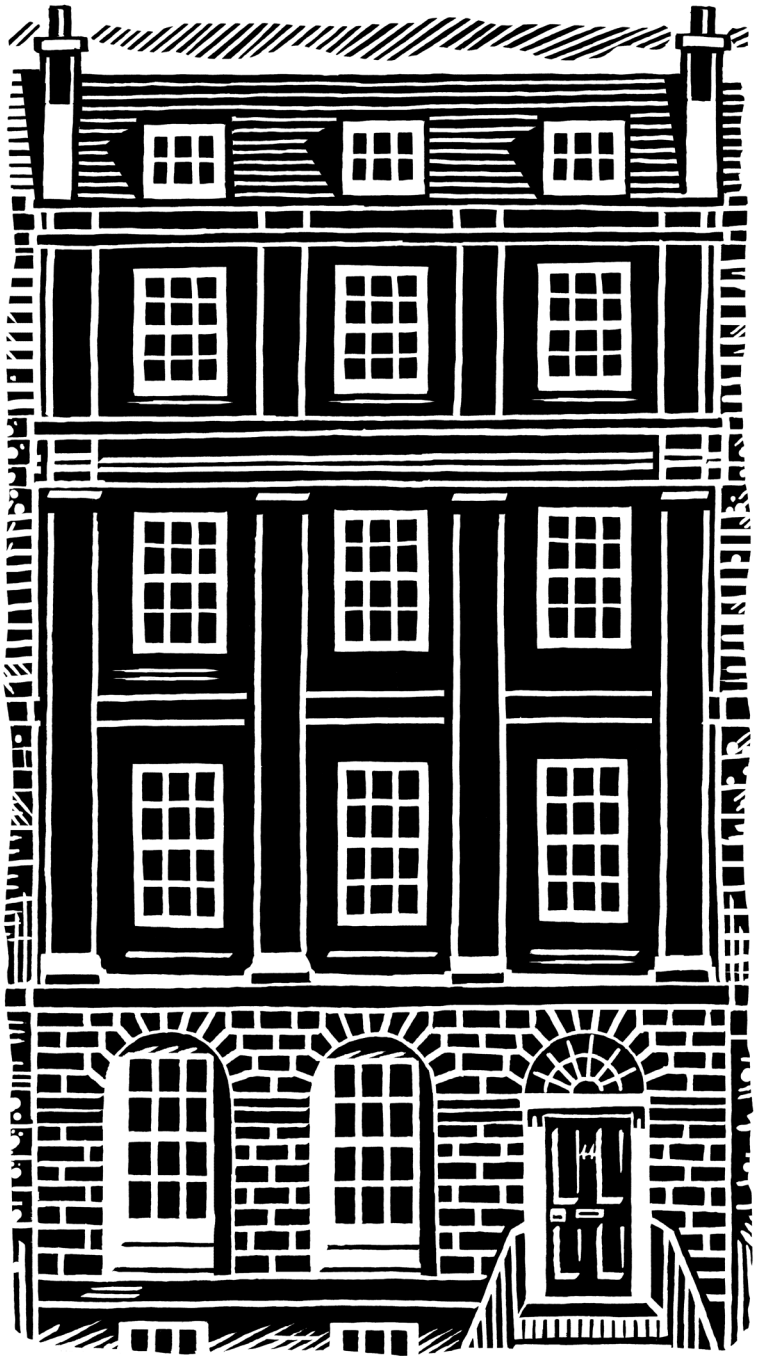
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ISBN 978-1-84697-232-4

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available on  
request from the British Library

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Falkirk, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

*This book is for Emily*



## 1. *Omertà, and Fascinators*

Even if she had not been an anthropologist, Domenica Macdonald would have understood the very particular significance of weddings. Anthropologists – and sociologists too, perhaps even more so – often tell us what we already know, or what we expect to hear, or perhaps what we are not surprised to learn. And so we all know, as did Domenica, that weddings are far more than marriage ceremonies; we know that they are occasions for family stock-taking and catharsis; that they furnish opportunities for naked displays of emotion and unscheduled tears; that they are a stage for sartorial and social ostentation; that they are far from the simple public exchange of vows they appear to be.

These insights had been impressed upon Domenica decades earlier by a visiting professor, one Salvatore Santaluca of the Istituto-Antropologico-Sociologico-Culturale of the University of Palermo. Santaluca's study of the traditional marriage practices of the hill villages of Sicily was something of an anthropological classic, considered by some to be the equal of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*, exposing the labyrinthine negotiations and discussions that preceded such weddings. Unfortunately, the publications of these details was viewed in some circles in Sicily as a breach of omertà, and the professor had some months later been shot in a restaurant in Messina, a crime that had yet to be solved, largely because those who were charged with investigating it were precisely the people who had committed it. Things had changed since then, of course, and the Italian state had tackled the criminal culture that had for so long blighted its southern regions; too late, though, for Santaluca and the various courageous Italian magistrates

and policemen who had taken on the secretive bullies holding an entire state to ransom.

It rather surprised Domenica that she should suddenly think of poor Professor Santaluca after all these years. But it was quite understandable, really, that she should be contemplating the institution of marriage and its customs, given that she was herself about to get married – to Angus Lordie – and was now sitting in her flat in Scotland Street, attended by her friend, Big Lou, preparing for the moment – only three hours away – when she would walk through the door of St Mary’s Cathedral in Palmerston Place. Her entry would be to the accompaniment of “Sheep May Safely Graze” by Johann Sebastian Bach, this piece having been selected by Angus, who had a soft spot for Bach. Domenica had acceded to this provided that it would be her choice of music to be played as they left. That was Charles Marie Widor’s Toccata, from his Symphony No. 5, a triumphant piece of music if ever there was one.

“People will love it,” she said. “It’s such a statement.”

“Of what?” Angus had asked.

“Of the fact that the marriage has definitely taken place,” said Domenica. “It’s not a piece of music that admits of any . . . how should I put it? . . . uncertainty.”

“Maybe,” said Angus. “It’s the opposite of peellie-wersh, I suppose.”

Domenica was interested. As with many Scots expressions, the meaning of peellie-wersh was obvious, even to those who had never encountered the term before. “And which composers would be peellie-wersh?”

“Some of the minimalists. The ones who use two or three notes. The ones you have to strain to hear. Thin music. Widor is thickly textured.”

They had moved on to discuss the hymns. Domenica felt vaguely uncomfortable when it came to hymns. She understood why people sang them – they performed a vital bonding function and undoubtedly buoyed the spirits – but she felt that the words rarely bore close examination, mostly being rather sentimental and somewhat repetitive. There were exceptions, of course: the words of “For Those in Peril on the Sea” were cogent and to the point. It was entirely reasonable, she felt, particularly in an age of global warming and rising sea levels, to express the desire that “the mighty ocean deep / Its own appointed limits keep”. But could one sing that at a wedding? One might at a mariner’s nuptials, perhaps, but neither she nor Angus were sailors. And then there was “Fight the Good Fight” which again had a perfectly clear message, but was clearly inappropriate for a wedding service, unless, of course, it was that of a pugilist, in which case the words would be taken as referring to professional rather than marital conflicts. “Jerusalem” was inspirational but referred to England, rather than to Scotland, and would seem quite out of place in a Scottish wedding. “Jerusalem” was inappropriate, too, Domenica felt, because right at its opening it asked a question to which the answer was almost certainly no. Its first line, stirring and dramatic though it may be, “And did those feet in ancient times . . .” invited the firm answer No, they certainly did not, words which could perhaps be set to music to be sung as a descant by the choir.

Angus had not been particularly helpful in his suggestions. He had himself composed the words of a hymn some time ago when he had offered to the hymn revision committee of the Church of Scotland a composition called “God Looks Down on Belgium”. The opening words of

this hymn, however, proved to be not quite what the committee wanted: “God’s never heard of Belgium / But loves it just the same / For God is kind and doesn’t mind / He’s not impressed with fame.” The second verse was even more unsuitable, making reference to Captain Haddock and Tintin, both of whom, it was felt, had no place in a modern, or any, hymn book.



“You do remember that I wrote a hymn called ‘God Looks Down on Belgium?’” said Angus.

Domenica gave him a warning glance. “I do indeed, Angus, and we are certainly not having that.”

“Pity. I always rather liked it.”

Now, sitting at her dressing table, while Big Lou attempted to fix on the fascinator she had acquired at great expense from a milliner in Fife – “One hundred and eighty pounds for four feathers!” Big Lou had exclaimed – Domenica remembered her first wedding. That had been so different. It had taken place in India, in Kerala, where she had married the eldest son of a Cochin mercantile family and had become for a brief time Mrs Varghese.



That wedding, like many Indian weddings, had lasted for days, with legions of relatives and friends coming from all over India and beyond. It had not been a particularly happy marriage and was very brief, her husband being electrocuted in the small electricity factory owned by his family. She regretted him, but, if she was honest with herself, she did not miss him unduly; nor did she miss her former mother-in-law. Angus came with no family baggage of that sort – except for his dog Cyril.

Domenica knew that she was taking on Cyril, but felt that given a choice – between an impossible mother-in-law or a dog – many might choose the latter . . . discreetly, of course.

## 2. *Late Climbers*

“Does it really matter what I wear?” asked Domenica. “This obsession with the bride’s outfit is understandable when the bride is twenty-something, but in my case . . .”

“Everybody will be just as interested,” said Big Lou, still struggling with the fascinator she was attempting to pin into Domenica’s hair. “It doesn’t matter how old the bride is . . . not that you’re all that old, Domenica.”

She was not quite sure how old Domenica was. Forty-five? A bit more? Or less, perhaps? And Angus was difficult to date too: in some lights he looked as if he was barely into his forties; in others, he looked considerably older. He was one of those people who could have been anything.

“I suppose age adds character,” said Domenica. “Or so we can console ourselves.” She looked in the mirror. It

would have been ridiculous to wear a conventional bridal dress. It would have been mutton dressed up as lamb, she thought – a metaphor that would mean less and less as people forgot about the distinction. Where could one buy mutton these days? It seemed more or less to have disappeared; everything, it seemed, was lamb because lambs presumably did not have the chance to reach muttonhood. So the expression would go, and the language would be further impoverished. Tell that not in Gath. That had gone completely by now, as had the habit of piling Pelion upon Ossa. Or making it to the altar. To the what? a contemporary teenager might be expected to ask. Down the aisle. Down the what?

“Yes,” said Big Lou through lips pursed to hold two hairpins. “I can’t be doing with those smooth faces that you see on film stars. You know the sort? All smooth – no lines. Nothing that shows us where the face has been.”

“A few lines,” agreed Domenica. “But one would hardly like to look too much like a prune.” She paused. The fascinator was not going to hold; she was sure of it. “Or like W. H. Auden.”

“The loon with the wrinkly face?”

“Yes. His face was described as looking like a wedding cake left out in the rain.”

Big Lou laughed. “It was a good face.”

“Yes. He referred to it as a geological catastrophe. And of course he smoked, which must have made it worse. The kippering effect.” She paused again. “You know something, Lou? I feel slightly embarrassed about all this.”

“About getting married?”

“Yes. I just don’t know . . .”

Big Lou laid a hand on her shoulder. "Haud your wheesht! It's fine getting married at your age, for goodness' sake. You're still a spring chicken compared with some."

Spring chicken, thought Domenica: another meat metaphor. So much of our language is still based on the things we used to do – like knowing where food came from. It was good of Big Lou, of course, but the fact remained: this was a late wedding.

"Everything's changed when it comes to age," Big Lou went on reassuringly. "Remember how people used to give up early? Remember how our parents' generation behaved? They put on carpet slippers when they were in their fifties. They did, you know."

"I was going to agree," said Domenica. "I was thinking of my father. He retired from the Bank of Scotland when he was fifty-six and he stopped driving at the same time. He said he was too old. Whereas today . . ."

"People run marathons at seventy."

Domenica nodded, inadvertently loosening the fascinator. "Exactly."

"Keep your heid still," muttered Big Lou. "I'm going to have to do it again."

"And they climb Everest, or try to, in their seventies."

"That's going too far," said Big Lou. "But you can certainly take fifteen years off everything these days." She paused. "But you can't take height off a mountain."

"So forty is the new . . ."

"Twenty-five. And fifty is the new thirty-five. It's all a question of attitude."

Domenica smiled. "So I shouldn't feel embarrassed about getting married at . . . at the age I am?"

Big Lou finished with the fascinator. "No. And that

bunnet, if you can call it that – that wee bawbee’s worth of over-priced feathers isn’t going to move now.”

Domenica felt at the delicate construction: it seemed firmly embedded. “Thank you, Lou. And thank you for being my bridesmaid.”

“Two auld hens together,” said Big Lou.

Domenica stood up and allowed Lou to smooth out her dress. She had chosen silver-grey Thai silk that had been made into a strikingly smart suit. Grey T-bar high-heel shoes completed the picture of elegance.

She looked at Lou. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“Marrying Angus? Of course I do. I wouldn’t have agreed to be bridesmaid if I didn’t.”

“I suppose not,” mused Domenica. “Can you imagine a bridesmaid who fundamentally disapproved of the groom? She’d have to stand there and shake her head ominously as the service went ahead. And perhaps the occasional glance at the congregation to say, Not my doing, any of this.”

Big Lou smiled. “Well, I have no reservations in this case. Except maybe . . .” She stopped herself, but it was too late.

Domenica looked at her anxiously. “Except what, Lou?”

Lou shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Come on, Lou, you can’t say ‘except that’ and then leave it at that.”

Big Lou looked down at the floor. “Well, it’s just that . . . well, about a year or so ago when Angus was in the coffee bar, he left his briefcase behind. You know that leather thing he carries . . . Well, he left it and I took it behind the counter to look after it for him and an envelope fell out.” She stared at Domenica. “There was a typed name

and address on it and I couldn't help but notice it as I picked it up."

Domenica held her breath. "Go on."

Big Lou lowered her voice. "The envelope was addressed to Mrs A. Lordie. That's what it said. Mrs A. Lordie, and it had his address on it. Drummond Place."

Domenica stood quite still. She said nothing.

"So I thought: is Angus already married?"

Domenica sat down heavily. The fascinator fell off; the feathers came into their own and it floated gently to the floor, where it lay, a small insubstantial thing, a vanity.

"Of course," Big Lou went on quickly, "it's very unlikely, isn't it? So I never mentioned it to you, and I'm sorry I did now. Really sorry."

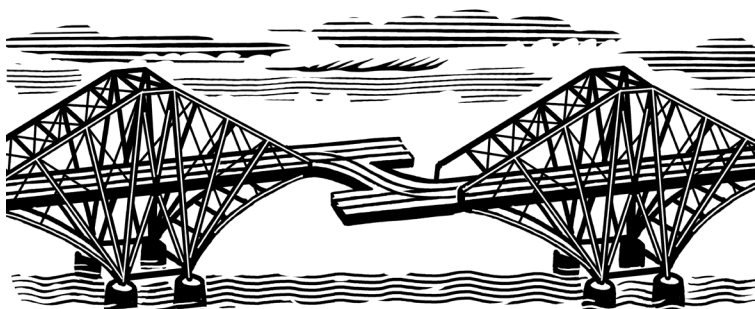
### 3. *Buildings, Bridges, Whisky*

Drummond Place, where Angus Lordie lived, and where, like Domenica, he was now dressing for his wedding, was at the top of Scotland Street. The flat that Angus occupied also served as his studio, and was on the opposite side of the square from the Scotland Street entrance; not that Drummond Place was really a square – parts of it looked as if they belonged to a square, while others were semi-circular. It was, he thought, a circle that had run out of architectural room, and had been obliged to draw in its skirts and become a sort of U-topped semi-rectangle; either that, or it had been the work of two architects, one starting at one end in the belief that they were to build a square, and another starting at the other end under the firm impression Drummond Place was to be a circle, or

circus. If that is what happened – and of course that was just a fantasy – then Angus imagined the moment of the meeting of the two sides, a moment of trigonometrical tension, no doubt.

Of course buildings can be made to join together without too much difficulty – a bit more stone here and there and one has the necessary coming together; how much more difficult it must be for those builders of bridges who start on opposite banks simultaneously. These must meet in the middle, and meet exactly: even a few inches can be a problem, and to miss by yards would be disastrous: no bridge should have a traffic circle or junction in the middle. And as for tunnels: how fortunate it was that the builders of the Channel Tunnel got it right and met, as planned, in the middle.

The studio in Drummond Place occupied the top two floors of a section of the handsome Georgian sweep. Its position was important: no artist likes to live and work in a basement, or even on the ground floor; such as are obliged through circumstance to do that find their paintings are starved of light and become gloomy: they paint a world of shadows and dim, overcast skies. By contrast, those, such as Angus, who occupy the natural realm of artists, further up, in garrets – the traditional abode of artists – have studios, and paintings, flooded with light. And his light, too, was of exactly the right quality: he faced north, looking out over the rooftops towards distant Trinity and beyond that the Firth of Forth and the hills of Fife – that strange kingdom beyond the Forth, as Angus sometimes called it. This northern light was clearer than the light to be had on the other side of the flat: southern light, Angus felt, seemed buttery by comparison; an impasto light, thick, greasy, torpid.



Facing north meant, too, that he could look across the gardens in the middle of Drummond Place to what he called the literary side, where two houses boasted commemorative plaques: one to mark the house of the poet Sydney Goodsir Smith, and the other to remind the passer-by that this was the house of Sir Compton Mackenzie, novelist, former spy, president of the UK Siamese Cat Association, and founder of the *Gramophone* magazine. Commemorative plaques are helpful but often commit an unintended solecism: they say something to the effect that So-and-So, author, or painter or composer (or whatever) lived here, and that is it. But did they live there alone? Usually not. What about their spouse, the mute inglorious husband or wife who might not have been a distinguished practitioner of the arts, might not have invented something or stolen somebody else's territory, or done anything of that nature, and moreover is ignored? Such spouses or partners may not be of great public interest, but surely should not be viewed as if they never existed.

So, in the case of Compton Mackenzie, there was Faith, his first wife, and then his loyal housekeeper, Chrissie McSween from the island of Barra, whom he married, and, after her death, her sister Lillian, whom he also married. They all lived there, and perhaps should be remembered

too in wording such as *Compton Mackenzie, author, lived here with his three wives*. That could be misunderstood, of course, but it would seem pedantic to provide further explanation by inserting additional wording at the end, possibly such as *one after the other of course* or *seriatim*. The last word, being Latin, might cause further confusion although not, obviously, to Edinburgh people, whose command of Latin is usually quite adequate for everyday purposes such as reading plaques, translating Cicero, and so on.

Compton Mackenzie, of course, was the author of that rollicking tale, *Whisky Galore*. Angus had read this book as a boy but did not remember much about it other than that it was about islanders in the Hebrides who discover a cargo of whisky washed up on their shores: a Scotsman's liquid dream, so to speak. Walking past Compton Mackenzie's house one day had given him an idea: the finding of a cargo of whisky was, in a sense, like the finding by the Israelites of manna in the wilderness. And that brought to mind Poussin's painting of that exact subject in the Louvre, and that . . . Yes, yes! The subject he had been looking for for some time: the discovery by a group of early Scots (much earlier than Compton Mackenzie's islanders) of a cargo of whisky washed up on the shores of Ardnamurchan. It would be a large-scale painting – as large as the Titians in the National Gallery of Scotland – and every bit as powerful, as emotionally arresting, but painted with the same cool palate as Poussin used in his later works. It would be the great Scottish painting, perhaps – dare one even imagine such a thing? – as great a painting as produced by any Scottish artist before him; as haunting as Cowie's *Portrait Group*, as whimsical as Raeburn's *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*, as geographically rooted as any view



of Mull from Iona, or indeed Iona from Mull, by Peplow or Cadell.

He thought of this as he stood at the top of the stairs and waited for Matthew, his best man. Matthew was late, but they still had plenty of time to get ready, although there was a rather awkward issue to be addressed – and that was the large hole that Angus had discovered in the kilt he was proposing to wear. It had not been there the last time he had worn it, but it was there now, the result of the attention of moths. Matthew might have an idea what to do – or might not; but the point about having a best man was that he would be available to deal with crises, of which this undoubtedly was one.

#### *4. How We See the World, and Scotland*

“Angus,” panted Matthew, “I’m so sorry I’m late. It was the boys, you see. Tobermory had been sick over Rognvald and Elspeth was just at her wits’ end. You know that stuff you give children, that Calpol stuff, it’s pink, and you give it to them when their temperature goes up; that stuff, well we couldn’t find it and so I had to run down to the chemist in Stockbridge and buy some and it was only when I was standing in the queue in the chemist’s that I realised that Tobermory had been sick over me too . . .”

Angus, opening the door to his best man, laughed reassuringly. “We’ve got plenty of time – plenty. Look, it’s three hours at least before we have to be there.”

Matthew glanced at his watch. “I know, but still, it’s going to take us twenty minutes to walk over to Palmerston Place and you have to speak to the minister and so on.”

“The Provost,” said Angus. “It’s a Piskie cathedral.”

“Well you have to speak to him,” said Angus.

Angus ushered Matthew into the flat, placing an arm around his shoulder to calm him down. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’ve got hours.”

They went into the drawing room, a shabby, faded room furnished with ancient, chintzy chairs, a cocktail cabinet of obscure provenance, and a writing bureau stuffed with letters. Angus had inherited this bureau from an uncle in Broughty Ferry, and the correspondence had nothing to do with him, but related to the affairs of an earlier generation: personal letters postmarked 1952; bills from long-departed traders for sums that seemed so tiny now (three pounds for a new central heating radiator, for instance; one pound ten shillings for a jacket from Forsyth’s); an invitation to attend a Highland Ball in Inverness, and so on. They should all have been thrown away, and Angus had occasionally steeled himself to do just that, but had cavilled at the idea every time: to throw all this away seemed to him to be throwing away the memory of a life. Nobody could be interested in these minutiae of his uncle’s existence, but they were the physical remnants of a life, and somehow they bound Angus to one who had been fond of him, and who had proved generous.

Matthew, having regained his breath from running up the stairs, moved over to the window and looked out at the sky. “It’s a great day for a wedding, Angus,” he said. “Look at that sky. Not a cloud in sight. Not one. Blue, all the way up.”

Angus joined him at the window. “Good,” he said. “Domenica will be so pleased.”

Matthew turned to him. “That’s a very significant thing you said, you know.”

Angus looked puzzled. “What?”

Matthew explained. “You said that Domenica would like this weather. That shows that you’re looking at the world from her perspective. And that’s a good omen for the marriage.”

Angus was embarrassed. “Oh really . . .”

“No,” Matthew went on. “I mean it. I haven’t been married all that long . . .”

Long enough, thought Angus, to become a family of five.

“I haven’t been married all that long,” Matthew went on, “but one thing I’ve learned is this: you have to look at things from your spouse’s point of view. You have to get used to seeing the world through four eyes rather than two.”

Angus frowned. “A peculiar sort of vision, surely.”

“You may scoff, Angus, but it’s true. What I really mean to say is that if your first thought is for her – and you’ve just shown that by thinking of how Domenica will feel about the weather – then that shows that you’re already thinking in the way I said you should.”

Angus looked at his friend. Dear Matthew; so serious at times, so . . . so vulnerable, standing there in his Macgregor kilt with that curious buttonhole in his jacket – white heather? *The White Heather Club*: his aunt – the wife of the uncle in Broughty Ferry – had gone on about that when as a small boy Angus had visited them for weekends. It was all tied up with Andy Stewart and country dancing and shortbread and all those . . . all those Broughty Ferry things, as he thought of them. He smiled at the memory. And yet, that was what Scotland – or a bit of it – was all about. It was about that mawkish sentimentalism just as much as it was about the hard life of bleak high-rises or dank tenements; “Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up” – that

haunting line of Edwin Morgan's that somehow summed up the hard-faced countenance of Scottish deprivation and defeat, that landscape of blighted and disappointed lives that we had to do something about but that we inevitably failed to heal.

He mused on this, and would have liked to talk to Matthew about it. He would have liked to say to him, "What can we do, Matthew? It seems that everything we try in this country fails. We know what we want Scotland to be, don't we? We know that we want it to be a place where there's justice and freedom from want. We know that we want people to be . . . well, we want them to be warm, don't we? We want them to have decent health. We want them to feel that . . ." But he could not speak to Matthew about all this now, as they stood at his window, only hours from his marriage.

He looked at Matthew. How often, he wondered, do we look at our friends, really look at them; because to look at somebody, to stare at them intently, makes one aware of their humanity, their being – exactly that thing that he, as a portrait painter, tried to capture; their life, really; their vitality, their essence.

Matthew looked back at him. "Is there anything wrong?" he asked.

Angus nodded.

Matthew's alarm showed on his face. "Oh no," he groaned. "You're not going to tell me you've changed your mind. It's that, isn't it?"

Angus shook his head. "No, no. I still want to get married, and I want it to be this afternoon, but it's just that . . . well, you see my kilt . . ."

He pointed across the room, to where the kilt was draped over the back of a chair.

Matthew's gaze moved to the kilt, and he gave a start.  
"My God, Angus. You're a Campbell."