

one

Three men, nominally soldiers, stroll back in the failing light. Sleet flickers at their faces, but they are warm within their greatcoats and appreciative of being, for a few freakish moments, no one's special responsibility. The pretence of freedom is there to enjoy. Besides, if they get back too soon they'll almost certainly be given a job. So they dawdle, confident that if challenged they could mount a case. After all, they're returning from a legitimate task – constructing shelves in a medical store. Three days in all. Of course they strung it out.

Though relative newcomers to France, they are fast learners, more or less adept at the art of ducking and dodging. When their sergeant bawls them out they'll blame the illogical layout of Base Depot. And it's true: the camp is a labyrinth. If they could go conveniently as the crow flies, through several tall fences, through the field prison and a labour compound, they would be back at the bakery in no time – a walk of five hundred yards. But as it is they must

go in the opposite direction, to the hospital gate.

Their boots crunch on the hard snow, sinking a little with each step so that it's like walking on beach sand. For Harry Lambert this is no longer a novelty. In Australia he learnt about European snow from chocolate-boxes. To see and feel it for the first time was arresting, for about five minutes. Then it was plain miserable.

'Nice while it lasted,' says Aubrey Brett. He is the shortest of the three, bug-eyed and plump. The men call him Bunter.

'There are carpentry units,' says Natty Mills, a recently arrived boy of eighteen. 'A bloke could get himself transferred.'

'You know what you'd be doing there, don't you?' says Bunter.

'What?'

'Making coffins.'

Mills doesn't like to argue, but it's clear he has his doubts. Coffins are just one of many possibilities. He looks to Harry, who is more than twice his age, for an authoritative opinion. Harry is silent. Early in their brief friendship Mills showed him a photograph of his brothers and sisters, all broad-faced and pale as if deprived of light by the whopping trees of their Gippsland hills.

Emerging from among the timber huts, the men cut across the open paddock. Surprisingly, there is still a convalescent moving slowly near the perimeter fence. Harry resists the impulse to look away, knowing it's better to be ready with a cheery word. But the man isn't a cheery sight:

face like a skinned rabbit, bluish in the cold. He crooks his dented head into the hollow of his collarbone and shudders on his crutch.

‘*His dancing days are done,*’ says Bunter.

Mills disapproves. One day he might tell Bunter to shut up, as most people do.

‘Chin up, mate,’ Bunter hollers into the wind, apparently unaware that it might be construed as a taunt. The convalescent swivels on his crutch to give them a long agate-eyed look. He bares his teeth in an ambiguous smile.

Mills surprises Harry with a quiet nudge. ‘I’d shoot myself rather than come back like that.’

At the gate they present their passes to the provosts. ‘Field Bakeries South,’ a Red Cap reads aloud. He looks them over dismissively. Cooks and dough-boys. The sort that don’t bite back.

‘Yeah, go on – home to mother.’

‘I’ll give *you* mother!’ says Bunter, but skipping away so the Red Caps grin.

Back in barracks, after Parade and grub, Privates Lambert and Mills squat to clean their mess-tins at the outdoor pump. They are alone and the youth catches Harry with an earnest look: ‘You’ve never been in the line?’

Harry guesses he’s remembering the man with the skinned face. It’s not an impertinent or a reproachful question, just youth referring to supposed experience. He has to admit he’s been no nearer the front than Amiens, a few hours between trains. Mills is understandably disappointed.

He wants to know about killing, and how to subdue his terror.

Harry would like to help. While almost wholly ignorant of warfare, he knows a thing or two about terror – how to hold it in, how to panic unobtrusively. He has had many provocations, from Uncle Lew’s lurid stories to his first astonished awareness of distant artillery fire (actual shells, actual death!). His will is inclined to flicker, to go out altogether for a split second or longer. So far it has always reignited, and that’s what people see, the resurrected Harry Lambert, and generally without any inkling he has repeatedly collapsed.

He can think of only one recent instance of an outsider seeing through to his timid heart. At a training camp outside Melbourne there had been an instructor who’d hated him with a passion. Not a first, but still a shock. Sergeant Cairns was undersized and elderly – a silver-haired terrier with a dirty turn of phrase: ‘Lambert, you big bum-fucker! Where were you in ’15?’

Harry tried to explain: his age . . . sick and dependent mother . . .

But the terrier had the scent of something sly and despicable. On route marches he flung pebbles at Harry’s big lumbering body for no better reason than it amused him. ‘I’m awake to you, Lambert!’

Awake to what? That he would never be a good soldier? That he held himself distinct?

The sergeant had ideas of reshaping him. His method was simple. He denied him leave and set him the solitary

chore of honing his bayonet to a razor edge. Before long Harry was rehearsing the sensations of sudden death, because you can't hone a bayonet and not contemplate the damage it must do to a man's belly. He couldn't conceive of an enemy belly, only his own. Rasping metal on metal, he considered how the weapon would penetrate his softness; how it would pierce the gut and spongy organs that were as much the centre of his being, his essential self, as his flinching mind. The lesson he took from this, if he didn't already know it, was that the army was a sort of suicide. At the time he didn't much care. He supposed it was because his mother wasn't long dead.

But none of this helps Mills, who seems to believe there is no steadier man than Harold Lambert. The youth scours his mess-tin with two gritty fingers, not exactly waiting for a reassuring word, but as if he expects something of the older man's apparent self-possession to rub off. Harry is uneasy but also sorry for him.

'I don't know about you, Natty, but I'm in no hurry to get shot at. They can keep their blood and carnage.'

'But if you've never seen it . . .'

'Don't want to. I'm comfy back here. I had a little taste in Britain. A mule. I saw a mule get his innards blown out. That cured me of any curiosity for battle.'

Mills shakes the drips from his mess-tin. He nods politely. Harry doesn't continue. He's afraid he's made too much of a small thing. Yet he remembers the mule very clearly – an ugly animal, rusty-looking with a black and hairy mouth. They were out on Salisbury Plain. The exercise was said to

simulate an advance behind a protective barrage. Two antiquated guns fired blanks to give proceedings the stink and din of authenticity. Gathered with his unit on a slight rise, Harry watched another group move in formation, each man equidistant from his neighbour, through a snowy corridor bounded by a river and a line of smoke flares. Fifty yards to his right a team of four mules, whose role it was to haul the guns, stood in their traces. They seemed quite indifferent to the racket, the nearest of the lead pair intent on niggling its partner. Then, the instant Harry turned again to the field, a gun broke up – an abrupt CRACK quite distinguishable from the uniform din. After a moment's indecision the men ran to help the crew, vanishing into the smoke. Harry supposes he followed a few paces. But then he froze. He remembers the terror of not knowing what the smoke might conceal, remembers turning back, only to see the mules, one with its belly pouring out onto the snow. Still upright, it stumbled and stamped, pulling at the others, who went a little way in response then resisted. He can still see its entrails, smooth and marbled, steaming in the cold air – a paler vapour than the prevailing smoke and fumes. Astonishingly, the mule didn't scream or whinny. Such a gaping wound and no apparent pain! He wondered how long it could continue to stand there before dropping.

And then the men returned at a jog, exultant, shouting 'Bloody miracle!' because no one was hurt. This was when it fell, collapsing sideways and dragging at the others – living, then dead.

two

Mrs Sylvia Wadley,
30 Sargood Street,
Hampton,
Melbourne, Victoria,
July 27, 1968

Dear Julie,

What a lovely surprise to receive your letter – Liz Lambert's girl! I remember your mother very well. I think that as a young girl I was at her christening, although I can't be sure. I might even have a picture. There are so many photos in Mum's old albums that I can't put a name or a date to. It's dreadful when the old people go. Everything is lost. I think you are very good to put on this reunion thing. And it's a wonderful idea to honour old Harry. Who else will remember him if not us? I must say I thought of him a lot when Jack was away in New Guinea. I didn't like to. I couldn't help it.

You know you might lose them, but you keep saying: not me, not us, not my Jack. Be that as it may, it happens. Men get killed. It's very cruel. I don't remember the memorial service for Harry. I do remember them saying he got shot and drowned in the mud. I'm not sure whether it was Gallipoli or France. I think probably Gallipoli because that's where they came in off the boats. The old people would know. And there are records of course. Uncle Dick is still hanging on, eighty-five or more. He'll be able to tell you. I suppose there will be a great to-do everywhere, and not just with the Lamberts. I read in the paper that the government is planning a big commemoration. I don't remember the armistice, but you can't let fifty years go by without some sort of hoorah. The old ones deserve it. If you like I can get up and say a word about Harry, just a few things that stick in the mind. He wasn't always dour. He could be quite the clown. I wonder, do they still make those neenish tarts? Those little fruit pies with pink and white icing? I think they do. According to Harry, they came from a country called Neen. I believed him. I believed him until I was nineteen or twenty, long after he was dead. Also, I saw him in several pantomimes and funny talking parts. I saw him play a Chinese emperor who chopped off people's heads. You need something happy to remember, don't you think? I sent him letters and presents – we did it for all the uncles. There are too many sad stories. When Jack and his service mates get together it's always sad stories. They get drunk and

weepee. I'm not saying hide the beer. God forbid! But these occasions cry out for a bit of levity. I'm sure you'll manage things wonderfully, a person with your schooling. You can bet on me and Jack being there, and maybe my daughter and one or two of the boys as well. The photos in the big envelope are for the display. Please treat them like gold. I don't have copies. You should also try my sister Ruby. She will certainly have something to say, although I doubt she'll be well enough to come down. I've enclosed the address. Thank you for your efforts. It's lovely to see you taking an interest,

best wishes,

your Aunty Sylvie and Uncle Jack

PROJECT NOTES, July 29, 1968

Mum will love this one, even if she can't say for certain whether they have met as adults. She remembers, or imagines she remembers, the aunts and uncles hovering benevolently over her childhood and would like me to bring them back, dead ones included. Doesn't matter that Aunt Sylvie was never one of them. Aunt Sylvie is almost the right vintage, a little young perhaps, but a true Lambert and a relic of a better world. What I find surprising, these relics aren't all geographically distant. Mum is suddenly ashamed to think that there are Lamberts on the opposite side of Melbourne and we have never bothered to say hello. I told her, 'Write to them, if it's so important to you.' She

wouldn't. I don't know what constrained her, perhaps the assumption that I would do it for her. I wonder: when she reads Sylvie's words will she recognise herself? I had no idea I would find my own mother in various guises. The same concerns, the same quirks of speech, the same careless notions of history.

Photos mostly of Sylvie's Hampton family. Weatherboard house going up amid the tea-tree, when the suburb was new. Kids under big hats. Her Jack sitting proudly behind the wheel of a friend's Riley. There is only one item from the first war: a 1916 postcard from old Uncle Dick in a Cairo hospital. Pyramids and camels. He writes of an ulcerated leg-wound. Mentions his brothers.

There is nothing by, from or about Uncle Harry, which is disappointing. If Sylvie and the other young women wrote to him, surely he wrote back. I want to hear his voice.

three

During his time in France, Harry has come to understand his mother's antipathy to snow. She called it the white wolf at the door, though as a bookbinder's daughter growing up in the East Anglian city of Ipswich she can't have suffered too many deprivations. His father, on the other hand, had dug mangels from the rime-cruste fields of his village. He told horror stories of frostbite and fingers reduced to stumps. He recalled Christmas as a hungry time – 'and none of your holly and mistletoe and threepenny pieces in the pudding!'

Harry doesn't go hungry. At the Australian army bakery at Rouen the cooks serve up roast beef and flaming 'plum duff'. The mess-hut is hung with Union Jacks and ruffled crepe. The tables glitter. There is Castlemaine bitter and Rutherglen port and the faces of his companions are red and beaming. He tugs at bonbons and snorts at clever jokes and speeches, to all appearances a happy man. But it isn't the seasonal camaraderie that buoys him. He is planning a

sortie into Rouen. He has applied for leave, though until now he hasn't been interested in sightseeing. The impetus was a little greeting card that arrived with the rest of his Christmas mail. It contained a pressed yellow rose from his garden. His great niece Sylvia wrote: 'Mademoiselle Elise Cordier that Aunt Sarah said was one of the best.' He pictured her not as a young woman but as the little girl she'd been in 1905, a year after his father's death. He wanted to weep, so intimately had she touched his longing for home – or for that imaginary home that no longer exists.

It brought back how Sarah, his mother, had coached the girl; how she had lifted Sylvie up onto her knee and demanded, 'Tell me the name of that there rose.'

Four-year-old Sylvie had been reluctant to guess. She sat gnawing her fist. Ma pouted and scoffed, saying that Sylvie must have been behind the door when the brains were given out.

'Captain Christy,' Sylvie at last summoned the courage.

'Captain Christy? No no, you're all mixed up. You're not like your Uncle Harry. Do you know when he was your age he could say the name of every lady and gentleman in the garden? His father made him a lesson of it. "What's that one, Harry-lad?" And Harry would say: "That there's General Jack." Or: "That there's Souvenir de la Reine de Anglestairs."'

The curriculum at Harry's inferior boarding school, where he'd passed his adolescent years, hadn't run to modern languages, but he knew that his father's French had been preposterous. With the exuberance of a man who

came late to reading, Sammy Lambert had looked at the foreign names in catalogues and pronounced them as he saw fit. The upshot was that Harry and his mother were fluent in a secret gibberish.

‘Ask your Uncle Harry, ask him that one there.’

They gazed up to where the rose overhung the verandah in sinuous zigzag canes. The new buds were egg-yolk yellow, the open blooms like straw-coloured crepe. This plant had a history. It was older than Harry. ‘Sylvie, you must know *her!*’

‘Oh yes, Sylvie,’ said Sarah. ‘Mademoiselle Elise! One of the best. See if you can remember. Mademoiselle Elise Cordier.’ And she drilled the girl just as she and Sammy had once drilled their son. ‘Mademoiselle Elise Cordier, Mademoiselle Elise Cordier . . .’

In this way they had perpetuated Samuel Lambert’s enthusiasms.

That night Harry dreamt of his father’s garden. It was an unchanging place, the same old clones living on and on. The roses bobbed and rocked and reeked sweetly of human ingenuity. Here were the eminent ones of his father’s century, mostly Gauls it has to be said: Victor Hugo, purplish and drooping, General Jacqueminot, upright and spiny amid the lop growth of countesses and dukes. By the tin fence was Frau Karl Druschki, a stately matron of sculpted ivory – recently taken in hand by patriotic nurserymen and relaunched as White American Beauty. Harry soaked up his mother’s quirky gestures, the sensation of sun on his body, the mingled scents of roses and freesias and early

summer plums, and wafting elements from further afield: wheat pollen, the clucking of a neighbour's chickens, yeast and sweet cinnamon from the bakery, street voices from beyond the fence.

This impression of stasis, he suspects, is influenced by a photograph he carries in his wallet. Uncle Lew Broughton took it in 1903, a year before Sammy's death. There's a pretence of spontaneity, as if Harry and his mother are looking up suddenly at an unexpected visitor, but in reality Lew posed it carefully. While the printing process gives the light that coppery look of a dust storm, it's nonetheless intense. Shadows are compact and dark. And the clarity is extraordinary. You can see the opal brooch on Ma's blouse and the rose petals strewn under the bushes. And there is Harry in his sleeveless baker's shirt, tall to the brink of ungainliness, solidly built but narrow-shouldered (like a bottle of hock, according to Lew). The exposed skin of his upper arms is pale as dough. Looking impossibly young, he bows over a rosebush. In one hand he has a harvest of flowers, in the other a knife. He likes the man in this picture. Perhaps the instinct for evasion, for wriggling and shifting, is there, but undeveloped. He has an ironic charm and self-confidence. He is a man in his element.

Beside him at the table, Natty Mills tells the story of his sister's wedding. He sparkles with pride when he speaks of all the good things laid out on trestles. The cake was iced with marzipan. Would they have tasted marzipan? For Mills the word is as marvellous as the flavour. Bunter is surprisingly

tactful. He doesn't belittle the glories of marzipan. He says it's a French invention, and a French word, and embarks on an etymological exposition to demonstrate his mastery of the language.

Harry sips his beer. He is conscious of how small things can revitalise a person. Mills has his marzipan. Harry is thinking roses. Somehow Sylvie's little card has effected a shaky rejuvenation. He keeps it by his stretcher bed. The flower is a blotchy stain against the stippled surface, the last image he sees at night, the first in the morning – a charm, a memento of the impossible stasis of his dreams. It won't last. It can't last. But it's better to have *something*.

Having inherited his father's sticky and obsessive mind, he knows as much as there is to know about Mademoiselle Elise. She dates from the mid-60s. She was named for the breeder's infant daughter. But what sets him humming with intention is a phrase from an old catalogue – 'the famed Cordier establishment at Montigny, convenient to Rouen'.

He sips his beer and plans an expedition.

When the opportunity comes – six hours' leave on a witheringly cold Sunday – he finds he must put up with Bunter. It can't be helped. It would be an unsociable act, beyond the pale, to go off without him.

They ride in a tram, the mist freezing into blisters on the window.

Of course Bunter doesn't know it's an expedition. He has his own ideas. There are time-honoured ways for a soldier

to spend his precious leave, and Bunter is both an opinionated virgin and a traditionalist. He's for a stroll about the city, a good feed, a bottle of plonk, a woman. Not that he's the carousing sort, swearing that in his native Footscray he's a model of sobriety, a straight-laced solicitor's clerk. But they're not in Footscray, and after weeks of being confined to camp he thinks he's owed a soldier's pleasures.

'I don't fancy your chances,' says Harry.

'Got to know where to look,' Bunter boasts.

'It's Sunday for Christ's sake!'

'Sunday or no Sunday.'

Harry doesn't believe him. He looks out at the leaden sky. Even Bunter has to concede that the day is bleak. For a minute his enthusiasm seems to fizzle. Then all at once he initiates a conversation with the woman opposite. She smiles tolerantly, though Harry suspects she finds his French incomprehensible. Bunter's voice is louder than the rattle and clank of the tram. Other passengers avert their eyes. Harry feels implicated, damned by association, especially when the woman takes refuge behind a little pamphlet.

'They love it,' Bunter murmurs in his ear. He subscribes to the theory that French women are everything that Australian women aren't – informal, unshockable, greedy for sex with strangers. It's a common enough theory in camp, but Bunter is undeniably a cockhead. Harry has been thinking in such terms for months and is no longer surprised. Good blokes and cockheads. Then there are mugs. He suspects he might be a mug. Who else would share his leave with Bunter?

He would prefer to be indifferent to what other men think of him. As far as he can make out he's regarded as an accepting sort, docile and easily put upon. From the beginning he was *old Harry*, vaguely comic for being forty-two years of age and a peculiar specimen. He plays cards for matches but not for money – 'Like a Methodist,' they quip. He gives out his razor and brush, and sometimes a few shillings, and passes around the back issues of *Harper's Magazine* that Lew sends from home. Whether because of his age or his height, or his expertise as a baker, or because he seems to be above the usual fray of bickering, he attracts lonely and uncertain men. It seems he reassures them. He can't imagine a more fraudulent father-figure, though he recognises that people in need are slaves to a fixed idea. On the other hand, there is something sustaining in their conception of him. It dispels the misery of snow. It buffers him from the ugly habit of introspection.

Through the iced glass he gets a distorted view of the city. Along the Seine the respectable citizens have abandoned the *Grand Cours* to foreigners: a few British but mostly straggling colonials, clots of New Zealanders, Australians and Canadians. A lucky few have female company: nurses and WAACs, and here and there a gregarious Frenchwoman. Americans are still thin on the ground, though the papers assert that they are here in numbers. Out the front of a public office a pair of black-bearded Sikhs, purplish about the lips, scurry away from an elm as the wind dislodges snow from the upper boughs. The street restaurants, having retreated indoors, are full of huddling soldiers. Occasionally, despite

the clatter of the tram, he catches a phrase of feeble song, and finds himself thinking: So this is what's on offer – eggs and chips and a miserable pretence of pleasure. His own nostalgic quest seems a world more promising.

'Hey,' he tells Bunter as if suddenly inspired, 'what about something different? Let me see the map.'

Bunter is instantly suspicious. 'I know your *something different*. You know what you can do with your churches and museums.'

Harry assures him he has no desire to poke about in public buildings. 'We could go see a friend.'

'What friend?'

'A woman, Bunt – a woman if you can behave yourself. Mademoiselle Elise Cordier.'

Bunter snorts dismissively. Harry couldn't possibly know any French women. But he likes being joshed. He rises to the promise of a sham adventure.

'I can't find her without you,' Harry tells him.

'You can't find her because she doesn't exist.'

Feigning hurt, Harry takes the map. The tramway ends at a place called Bapeaume. From there there's a broken line – signifying what? a rough track? – through open fields and forest. Then they can pick up the Montigny road.

'This mademoiselle, she got two heads or what?'

'Mademoiselle Elise? She's got all the essential parts, Bunter, don't you worry.'

At the terminus they accost the driver as he jumps down from his cabin. Harry feeds Bunter the questions. The driver is impatient and not at all helpful to them. Cordier?

A rose grower in Montigny? Never heard of him.

‘Surprise, surprise,’ says Bunter.

They try a *gendarme*. Same result. Then a woman with a whimpering child. Cordier? *Un horticulteur*? No, not here. There are several in Martainville, but not in Montigny. And she should know, because she has a daughter who married into the village. By now Bunter’s fed up, but Harry won’t turn back.

The streets are a wilderness of snow: white heaps in the gutters, on the tops of walls, on the sills of exposed windows. Great cracked slabs cling to the roofs. With their papered windows and smokeless chimneys the houses have an abandoned aspect. Coal is like gold, Bunter remarks morbidly. He reads the French papers. Says that every day some poor old duck freezes to death in her bed.

The wind comes in whistling gusts, spattering their faces with sleet. But across the road there is a boy, apparently quite indifferent to the cold. Harry guesses he must be about twelve, and probably a bit simple, the way he drags along in the ditches kicking at ice. He wears only a light shirt and corduroy trousers, and clogs, heavy wooden clogs such as Harry has only seen in illustrated fairytales. The boy skips when he sees them. ‘Messieurs, messieurs,’ he calls rapturously. He has a bunch of raffle tickets.

‘Ask what the prize is.’

Bunter obliges, rephrasing the question several times before making himself understood. ‘Coffee,’ he reports at last, not bothering to hide his scepticism. Even so, they fish in their wallets for a few coins. The boy’s very particular

about taking down their names. To Harry's horror, Bunter gives his as Napoleon. The boy doesn't bat an eye, writing it down gravely and adding a note that Harry gathers means 'care of the Australians'. To show him they're not all bastards, Harry takes the butt and writes his name in full, complete with rank and enlistment number. He doubts the boy appreciates this. A *sou* is a *sou*, with or without the humiliation.

'Ask if he's heard of Monsieur Cordier.'

'I've had a gutful of Monsieur Cordier. Ask him yourself.'

Harry stops still. Bunter catches his look, so uncharacteristically black, and can manage only half a grin. For Harry anger is a distressing emotion, as unwelcome and mysterious as epilepsy. He holds himself tightly. He practises circumspection, remembering the pain of past eruptions – almost all concealed and bearing on no one but himself. Bunter's grin departs in stages. He questions the boy with a sullenness that makes Harry want to swat him. The boy hasn't heard of Cordier, but knows of a house with roses. Acres of roses. He offers to take them there.

Nothing is said of money. He simply trots on ahead without looking back. He has an almost military step that forces them to hasten in keeping up. Before long they're out in the blanketed steppes. After fifteen minutes' tramping, the wagon-track joins the more substantial Montigny road and they push on through what the map describes as the upper reaches of the state forest of Roumare. Where the trees end they pass a single free-standing store, a cat

squawking mutely from a window. Then on through the blinding fields. A red brick cattle byre, more fields, hedges like iced puddings. The church spire and huddled houses of Montigny are clearly visible half a mile away, but the boy takes them north, following the verge of the forest. Underfoot the way becomes a hoof-gouged cattle path. Bunter declares them lost. 'If I aren't the biggest fool for listening to you, Harry Lambert!' Sensing their concern, the boy urges them on. Several times the trees open and close around them. Isolated farmhouses, their high thatched or black-tiled roofs seeming to bow under the weight of snow, loom and are left behind. Finally the boy indicates a wiry block of vegetation and the part-observed outlines of various buildings. Harry consults the map. It seems they are somewhere in the agricultural hinterland between Montigny and Maromme. The boy would come all the way, out of curiosity, yet Harry stops him at a thicket of poplars. If he could he'd stop Bunter too. He would like better company altogether, impossible company, his deceased parents no less. He would blindfold them and whisk them past all the squalor of undeserving France to arrive here at this isolated relic of their century. He can imagine his father's reverence. They should proceed humbly. Hats off to Monsieur Cordier, high priest of selective breeding.

If he still exists.

High on the brick wall of the barn is a faded sign: CORDIER,
ROSIERISTE.

'Top class, this,' Bunter sneers.

Yet they emerge from the trees and walk across the

road. Geese honk and racket in the buried fields. The house stands behind a brushwood fence, and banked on three sides by more than an acre of leafless, knotted and arching rose canes. There's a gate, timber with a few flakes of ancient blue paint. It sticks and requires a kick and a heave to open. Then the path forks, left to the privacy of a bleak garden, right to the brick-paved yard. As uninvited intruders they really should knock at the front door. Harry has Sylvie's pressed rose in the pocket of his greatcoat, brought along in the absurd belief that it might serve as an introduction. But suddenly he feels ridiculous. He leads the way into the plant nursery, which has obviously ceased to be a going concern. Never mind. As foreigners they can plead ignorance. In any case there's no one about.

While Bunter shivers under the eaves of the barn Harry strolls between the rectangular rosebeds. Very formal affairs, reminiscent of pictures he's seen of the Luxembourg Gardens: a stark tree-rose at each corner, occasional arches and pillars roped with thorny canes. The dwarfs are dumped with snow, muffled mounds, a brittle stick poking through here and there. Further along terracotta pots stand in tight phalanxes, unpruned growth tangled like razor wire. Beyond this, the first of the glasshouses stands open, dark within on account of straw mats laid over the steep roof. He can see only a little of the interior: rusted steel frameworks and benches, a disused burner. Wired to the wall of the barn, a series of old climbers have braided stems as thick as his wrist. In the bare zigzag twigs he imagines he can recognise the same cultivar that tumbled over

his back verandah in Rushburn – the original Mademoiselle Elise, fifty years old if she’s a day. Grasping the thornless wood, he follows the convolutions up to the extent of his reach. He remembers his father’s delighted confessions of having stolen a cutting from a swish house in Bendigo – a youthful crime, pre-Harry, when Mademoiselle Elise was the latest novelty from Europe. Yet it disturbs him to see her so bare and dishonoured by the season. It disturbs him to think she has grown old, forever a young woman, but old. Still, what did he expect?

He decides to leave before they’re discovered. But Bunter shouts and waves up to a tiny panel of glass, a small dormer jutting out from the frosted thatch. He’s certainly observant. There is a rippling shadow. Then the glass is clear.

Bunter goads him with a smile. So here they are! What a lark, Harry! Definitely worth the effort. Harry turns away. From behind the house comes the bang of a door. Bunter composes himself, ready to meet the face they had seen in the glass.

What Harry notices first is that she walks with a flat-footed grip on the world. Then her big hands, and her solidity. She is sculpturally fat, bottom-heavy, compact. Her phrases are crisp and abrupt, and though he can’t understand a word it’s clear she’s not rolling out the red carpet. Bunter does his best to explain, fending off her belligerence with a series of shrugs. She has no patience with his inept French, no liking for foreigners. The nursery is shut, Bunter translates. Shut, shut. No one to run it. The men are in the army. Could they please go away.

Harry reaches for Sylvie's pressed rose. 'Tell her we know Monsieur Cordier's roses and have come to pay our respects.'

'Pay our respects!' Bunter mocks.

'Tell her!'

He addresses her with another apologetic shrug and a cocked eye at Harry. Blame him, he insists. Blame that lunatic there. The woman replies with a few curt words. Monsieur Cordier is dead. Has been for fifteen years.

Harry tells her in English how sorry he is, and feels thoroughly stupid. Yet that doesn't stop him bullying Bunter into pumping her further. Would she perhaps be the great man's daughter?

'Oh no mistake about that,' Bunter assures him with vindictive pleasure. 'She's your girl, Harry.'

Whether Mademoiselle Elise has any English, she can certainly recognise ridicule. Harry feels himself blush. The geese they heard when coming in seem impossibly close, their honking invading the yard though presumably they are still at a distance. Shamed, Harry turns to go.

What would the old boy say? Poor Father! His mademoiselle so prickly and unappreciated!

On the long trek back he is full of regrets. He shouldn't have brought Bunter. He feels sure the woman knew she was being laughed at. But as they tramp again through the forest he has tentative ideas of making a second trip when the weather improves in spring. If he returns alone she will recognise his sincerity and somehow they will manage to communicate. Being so new to France, and to travel in

general, he has a naive belief that no one can be completely ignorant of English. And Mademoiselle Elise, daughter of a successful rose-grower, undoubtedly received an education. So gradually he grows less ashamed of his lapse. You can plod along just so long, head down like a shire nag, whereas exuberance – indeed foolishness – is a human trait, a Lambert trait.