



Overwhelming and compelling

Floortje Zwigtmán

Tricks of the Trade



photo Joris van de Leur

RARELY HAS A BOOK FOR young adults been so eagerly anticipated as *Tricks of the Trade*, the third book by the popular young author

Floortje Zwigtmán. She understands better than anyone else that adolescents aren't looking for a neat book of instructions for the future. These are stories that tell it like it is, historical novels about surviving in conditions where the laws and morals of polite society no longer seem to apply.

Tricks of the Trade is Zwigtmán's best novel to date. Adrian Mayfield is born in the poor East End of Victorian London, the son of a pub landlord and a seamstress. However, a different career lies in store for him.

It's not a scenario that the street-hardened lad could have envisaged: a wealthy older gentleman falls in love with him and takes him home. The man is Augustus Trops, a second-rate artist from Flanders. He introduces Adrian to the flamboyant circle of Oscar Wilde, where he meets other men like Augustus and finds work as an artist's model. The work pays well and he meets the most interesting and powerful people of his time.

Adrian is very pleased with his new life at first. Everything appears to be going swimmingly. Until, that is, London's *beau monde* decamps to Europe for the summer holidays, as happens every year.

Adrian, by now accustomed to luxury, ends up without any income. In a male brothel he discovers the flip side of his new life in the two-faced London of the nineteenth century, where gossip, blackmail and brutal police violence make homosexuality a highly dangerous way of life. Then he faces the choice of whether to put his integrity and his friendships on the line so that he doesn't have to live in a mouldy, cockroach-infested garret.

Tricks of the Trade is an intense book that is difficult to put down. It draws the reader in without resorting to cheap sensationalism. This is a result of Zwigtmán's unique ability to combine critical distance with open intimacy. The raw, breathtaking writing of this sharp, historical portrait really makes the reader think about life. Zwigtmán is one of the great modern writers of books for young adults.

PJOTR VAN LENTEREN

Floortje Zwigtmán (Terneuzen, 1974) made her debut in 2001 with *Spelregels: het verhaal van een Middeleeuws huwelijk* (*The Rules of the Game*), followed by *Wolfsroedel* (*Wolf Pack*), her breakthrough novel, in 2002. *Wolfsroedel* won both the Dutch 'Zilveren Zoen' award and the 'Gouden Uil', the most prestigious Flemish award for children's literature. The book, set against the background of the never-ending religious conflict in the Balkans, describes how circumstances can drive anyone to commit acts of infinite cruelty. Zwigtmán is not a writer of few words. Her third book, *Tricks of the Trade*, the first in a two-part series, has five hundred pages. In July, the Boekhandels Groep Nederland (BGN, a Dutch chain of bookshops) already declared *Tricks of the Trade* to be 2005's best book for young adults.

A 'Great Dutch Novel' for not-yet-adults, which will also entertain older readers with its glimpses into the world of Oscar Wilde. NRC HANDELSBLAD

Tricks of the Trade is a masterpiece with international appeal. DE VOLKSKRANT

Tricks of the Trade is a real doorstopper of a book, packed with pure reading pleasure (...). This is a brilliantly depicted world, full of questions, puzzles and menace; money, talent and pleasure, and conversations, loaded with elegance and repressed venom, between cynical hopeless romantics who fool the world on a grand scale.

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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

Wie Sonne und Mond (*Spelregels*). Zürich: Nagel & Kimche 2002 / München: Knauer Taschenbuch 2004.
Wolfsroedel ('Wolfpack'). Hildesheim: Gerstenberg (in prep.). Also in Korean (Dongnyok, in prep.)

An interview with Floortje Zwigman

‘LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY’

by Marita Vermeulen

(De Leeswelp, March 2005)

translated by Liz Waters

“Because he was a real artist, and therefore an accomplished liar, he saw a lot more.” From *Tricks Of The Trade* by Floortje Zwigman

In 2003 the Golden Owl Award went to *Wolf Pack*, Floortje Zwigman’s weighty epic about good and evil. In that novel she wove together two blood-soaked storylines. In her new book, *Tricks Of The Trade*, Zwigman uses a similar technique, but the context, atmosphere and tone are entirely different. She succeeds in recreating the nineteenth-century London of Oscar Wilde. “I want to create a coherent atmosphere for each book I write. A world of its own, where everything interlocks and operates according to the laws of that world,” she says. We observe historical characters through the eyes of the fictional Adrian, who has a lower-class background, and through him we sense the excitement evoked by the social and intellectual grandeur of Wilde’s entourage, but also the fear and uncertainty. In Victorian society, bounded by strict rules, you could be severely punished for trying to escape your preordained place in the hierarchy.

In Tricks Of The Trade, as in Wolf Pack, we see the dark beast that lies within humanity, even though that beast is kept in check by a strict behavioural code.

This book has more tragic malevolence in it. Even people who are very nice in an abstract sense can do terrible things to each other because of circumstances, or

specific character traits. Even people who genuinely love each other can hurt one another deeply.

Was it a difficult transition from Dracula, the fifteenth-century murderer, to Wilde, the nineteenth-century aesthete?

I've always been fascinated by nineteenth-century England. That's part of my make-up. I'm intrigued by all those things that seem familiar: glamour, idols, materialism. At the same time it's a very different country, where everything is done differently. That tension between the strange and the familiar fascinates me. And I want to broach subjects that have been with us for centuries in a story that has something to say to today's readers. I avoid explaining too much, though. You find yourself in 1894 and you simply have to cope. It's rather like being a backpacking tourist dumped in an unknown location: it's up to you to try to get home. I aim to offer my readers an extraordinary experience and I leave it to them to decide how far they want to get involved.

Why did you opt for a combination of fictional and historical characters, both in WOLF PACK and in TRICKS OF THE TRADE?

Because it gives me greater control over the story and freedom to accentuate the bits I think are important. I've made Adrian's mother an ambitious woman, pushing her children to get on in the world, so Adrian has a broader intellectual foundation than the other children around him. He belongs to the theatrical world too, and people from the higher classes like to move in theatrical circles, so theoretically I can have Adrian move through the entire Victorian class system without sacrificing any of the story's credibility. That's why the book ranges as widely as it does. If I'd stuck to historical events I would have had far less room for manoeuvre.

Among the upper classes, Adrian, an emerging homosexual, participates in an extremely complicated game of lying and deception. "The world wants to be

deceived. So deceive it.” Still, it seems strange that it’s so easy for a destitute seventeen-year-old to join Oscar Wilde’s entourage.

In the nineteenth century the mask you wore was crucial. You wore the mask of your class and you had to behave appropriately, to keep up appearances. The bizarre thing was that you could easily pull the wool over someone’s eyes by dressing and behaving like a member of the upper classes. You were whatever you professed yourself to be. So burglars and con men often dressed up as gentlemen. They could come and go as they pleased and the servants couldn’t ask questions.

Victorian manners were highly complicated and subtle. I’ve simplified them a bit, otherwise they’d be a dead weight slowing the story down.

Again and again your book brings out the treacherous nature of language and stories.

That’s right. In those days every social group had its own slang. There were words that belonged to a single boarding school, university or profession. It significantly reduced your chances of coming into contact with a different ‘cast’. You could climb to a higher rung on the ladder by earning a lot of money, or by having a lot of talent, like Oscar Wilde.

But Oscar Wilde already belonged to the better circles.

He didn’t belong to the real elite, and he wasn’t an Englishman, which was a big disadvantage at first. As an Irishman he wasn’t a natural member of the London in-crowd. He was an artiste, and that meant being one rung down, no matter how interesting you were. He was so successful, and his personality aroused so much interest, that eventually he became a popular guest of high society. If you didn’t have money or talent, sex was the only way to break the class barrier.

It's very painful, cruel in fact, the way Alfred (Bosie) Douglas unmasks Adrian. At that point we realise just how awful it is to be dependent on the goodwill of capricious gentlemen.

Reality catches up with the dream. And the reality is that you're being paid for your services.

In your story about a world that wants to be deceived, you show us time and again how every lie reflects an aspect of the truth. The way lies are told reveals something about reality.

Among artists, which is where Adrian finds himself, lying was essential. Homosexuality was a punishable offence, so you had to lie. A whole culture grew up around it, and the lie came through in literature, painting, and the art of conversation. The cult of the body, which Oscar Wilde wrote about, lay at the root of the art of the period. It was a way of dealing with a reality you could never be accepted as part of.

In a sense you were always on the edge of a social abyss.

If you were unmasked in that society you were as good as dead. You were ostracized. Acquaintances no longer greeted you. Invitations stopped coming. A terrible thing, because your network was vital. There was no provision for people who found themselves beyond the pale. There was no help, no mercy. People very much thought in terms of good and evil. In England especially, people believed very strongly that your fate lay in your own hands. If bad things happened to you, then you had only yourself to blame.

Were upper-class people also held to account for their human failings?

Among the middle classes there was strict social control, but anyone with a title could get away with an awful lot. In a sense they were the idols of their time. At the end of the nineteenth century the first proper media personalities emerge, with pages of coverage in the gossip press. Look at the hysteria surrounding Sarah Bernhardt; she was the Madonna of her day.

“I don’t know what it is about famous people. They always manage to disappoint you when you meet them in the flesh,” Adrian says.

That’s why I so enjoyed having him say that a character like Oscar Wilde, still an icon to this day, was such an ugly man.

At the same time you show how bewitching voices can be, and the ability to tell a story.

His biographers tell us that Wilde’s humour and ability to make life more beautiful made you forget he was a plump, ugly man with a bad haircut. This apparent contradiction comes through very clearly in a book like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, if you’re attuned to the references and hidden meanings. There’s the hedonistic aspect on the one hand and vulnerability on the other. The Oscar Wilde we’re familiar with is probably quite different from the person he really was. He was horribly afraid of being exposed.

So it’s a shame he ever came across a man like Bosie.

Yes, that was the worst thing that could have happened to him. Bosie was very self-centred. On the other hand I believe he’s been unfairly treated by history. In jail Oscar wrote a letter that placed Bosie in a very negative light. When the letter was published after Oscar’s death there was little Bosie could do in response. A foul move in my view. He’s gone down in history in a very poor light as a result. In a sense he’s just as much a kind of victim. He was born into a weird family, the product of an extremely miserable marriage, and his future, his attitude and his outlook were rooted in history and tradition.

Is that why you inject so much vulnerability into the scene where Bosie, overcome with grief at the death of his brother, is comforted by Wilde?

Yes, that’s to rehabilitate him a bit; Bosie felt terrible grief at his brother’s death. He wrote poems about it. It fits with the main theme of the book: searching for someone who loves you, in spite of all uncertainty, someone who genuinely wants to be there for you. I think that’s a desire everyone will recognise. We all

want to recover the safety of childhood. Adrian is at the threshold of a highly insecure adult existence. He will have to manage by himself, facing threats from all sides, literally – in early summer he almost starves to death. There's no one he can talk to about who he really is, deep down inside. Adrian is looking for safety, and at the end of the book he thinks he's found it.

Adrian must be very much in love to believe that, considering he's clever enough in every other respect. You illustrate this with statements like "Now I can never be certain about anything any more, I thought, feeling miserable enough to take myself seriously," and "Apparently the ways of expensive London restaurants were no different from those of the schoolyard, even if there was rather more elegance. And more repressed malice" .

Yes, I think he's blinded by his desire for security. The question is, will the person he has chosen be able to provide it in the end?

He looks to someone for safety who can't even protect himself.

That's a subject for the second book, where I write about the prosecution and trial of Oscar Wilde.

In reality tv shows they always say "Just be yourself". This book makes us aware of how difficult if not impossible that can be.

I think very few people are consistently themselves. There are unwritten rules about how you're supposed to behave as a young person, or in your twenties. When I see reality tv shows I'm always convinced that those people aren't real, they're just playing the person they think they are, or would like to be.

In a sense that's what Adrian does.

I think life is always a matter of playacting to some degree. Simply to survive it's a good idea to adjust to the situation you find yourself in. But sometimes that amounts to a serious impediment. At secondary school, for example, I had a strong sense of not being who I really was. It can be enormously frustrating.

Are you able to be who you really are in your books?

My books are very much me, yes. On paper I have no inhibitions. I can be myself, and that's marvellous.

With Adrian you are inquisitive, obstreperous in fact.

Yes, I want to be able to discuss anything at all, no holds barred. For the egotistical reason that it's interesting for me that way, not primarily because I'm thinking: how will my readers react, what will they think? Those are questions I don't consider when I'm writing. If I did, I'd clam up. As a writer you have to do whatever you enjoy doing, otherwise you run out of steam. After all, it takes a lot of time to write a book like this.

Sample translation from

Schijnbewegingen by Floortje Zwigman

(Baarn: De Fontein, 2005)

Translated by Lance Salway

[Pages 76-83]

By the time I arrived at Trops' house, my stomach wasn't just rumbling, it was thundering. As I slammed the knocker impatiently on the door, I decided that my first question would be: 'What have you got in the house?' To judge by Trops' girth, his larder was probably crammed with muffins, cakes and jam tarts. Or perhaps there might be some cold meat left over from last night's dinner, or kidneys, or kedgeriee – how long was it since I had last eaten kedgeriee? - or eggs scrambled in butter. Maybe even fried eggs and bacon. Mmm, bacon... I was so caught up in my gastronomic daydreaming that I failed to ask myself why it was taking so long for someone to open the door. I was too busy thinking about bacon. Not just with eggs but crisply grilled, or fried in a little oil or just fresh from the butcher.

Confound you, Trops, open up the door. I want to ransack your larder. I was struck by a sudden thought. What if he wasn't there? What if he was still sitting blind drunk on the steps of the Bodega? What if he was back in France, fondling the groins of Parisian nancy-boys? What if I was wasting my time? Believe it or not, I even started to whimper. At that moment I really did feel as though I had lived for two days on nothing but a watercress sandwich, that I hadn't slept at all last night and that I had spent weeks being annoyed by a drunken nincompoop who was too feeble to make anything of his life. I sank to the step beside the door, too worn out to care any more. There I would stay until Trops came back, in an hour or in a year. But in that latter event I would already have been carted away, because my mortal remains were blocking the steps. I could see myself as the little match-girl, slipping away with a smile on my lips into a heavenly dream in which roast geese leap from the table and waddle straight into your mouth, just like that.

But less than two minutes later it became apparent that my gloomy forebodings had been a little premature. No roast goose came waddling round the corner but Augustus Trops himself, with a large wicker basket on his arm from

which was drifting the promising smell of fresh bread. I scrambled to my feet at once, ready to rip the basket from his arm. Trops stopped at a respectful distance, just as he had when he saw his green suit for the first time.

‘Adrian Mayfield,’ he said, ‘as I live and breathe.’

I gave him a mocking bow. ‘The very same.’

At that moment I didn’t care if he really did think he had won and that I was ready to leap into his bed. Eat first. Worry about the rest later.

‘My dear boy, you’ve no idea how worried I’ve been about you. I went to ask Procopius to make me another beautiful jacket, and that Irish boy with a face like a bullfrog told me that you’d been discharged...’

I burst out laughing. So Marcel had saddled Trops with Paddy. I was willing to wager that this had been a grave disappointment to him.

‘I pictured you wandering through London quite alone, *mon fils*, and being led horribly astray. And that really worried me, believe me. Because if there’s any corruption of youth to be done, then Augustus Trops would much rather do it himself.’

Trops grinned into a beard that probably concealed at least three double chins. ‘But I mustn’t keep you standing on the doorstep, must I? What we have to tell each other can be much better said indoors, don’t you agree? Quite! Open the door for me, will you?’

He thrust a key at me. In typical Augustus Trops style, it was set with three rubies.

I turned the key and pushed the door open. Like an archaeologist opening an age-old treasure chamber, I peered curiously into the gloom,

It was like entering a spice warehouse on the banks of the Thames. There was a strong smell of cinnamon and cardamom in the air, and another odour too that I thought with excitement might be opium. It was a dangerous house. From a dark alcove a goldfish stared at me with bulging eyes from a bowl filled with cloudy water that should have been changed weeks ago. Tarnished mirrors hung on the walls, alongside wooden masks that looked as if they had been stolen from the

tomb of an old Pharaoh. I searched in vain for a practical piece of furniture like an umbrella stand.

‘Walk on through to the studio,’ said Trops. ‘I haven’t got round to arranging the rest of the house yet.’

He pointed to an ebony door that would have seemed more at home in the palace of a maharajah than a house in a London terrace: it looked like an exotic picture book, with lotus blossoms worked in silver and oriental princesses throwing themselves on funeral pyres. Heavens, what rubbish.

The studio of Augustus Trops was somewhat lighter than the hall but had the same ludicrous artistic furnishings: a combination of fairground booth, freak show and cabinet of curiosities. The only concessions to the comfort of the artist were a tall uncurtained window and a gigantic spherical lamp that had to provide enough light in dark, ever cloudy London. For the rest, the room seemed scarcely habitable, so crammed was it with art and kitsch that the entire collection threatened to smother you in a multi-coloured avalanche if you so much as lifted a finger. At one glance I saw a musical box with a mechanical nightingale, a poster of a can-can dancer, a dwarf with two heads (in preserving fluid), a skull with a hookah between its teeth, a number of Japanese prints, a set of Pan-pipes, a collection of false noses from Gamages’ department store, and a vase filled with wax flowers in different shades of green.

Walking on tiptoe, I pushed past a dresser draped with Indian shawls and a table that was scattered with gold knives and sweetmeats.

Well now, I thought, are you a Bluebeard or the witch from the gingerbread house?

‘So what do you think?’ asked Trops, making his way among the items in his collection with amazing agility for a man of his bulk. ‘I dare to wager that you have never before been inside a house like this!’

‘Consider the wager won, Trops!’ I had to agree with him. The house was unique, bizarre, colourful and theatrical, just like Augustus Trops himself. You either loved it or you ran a mile.

I decided to stay. To do myself a favour. And Trops too. Even though that wasn’t my intention.

He planted himself in the centre of the studio, rubbing his hands with enjoyment, grinning like a Cheshire cat because I was so overwhelmed by his playroom. ‘Take a good look round,’ he said, as if I wasn’t already doing so.

The sheer volume of objects and colours in the room was enough to induce a headache in someone of a nervous disposition. The walls were mainly green, of course, Trops’ preferred colour, but they were hung with paintings whose shrill gaudiness was a challenge to good taste.

On the hill of Golgotha, painted a venomous green, witches with naked moon-yellow buttocks danced a frenzied witch’s Sabbath around the cross of Christ. A naked young man, pink as a baby, lay in the nest of a monstrous purple eagle. An emaciated child-king sat on a throne of jewels as colourful as glass marbles, listening to a sphinx posing riddles.

They were all paintings that only a permanent occupant of a mental hospital would want to hang on his wall. I wondered if Trops had ever sold a single picture.

I stepped over some cushions scattered with withered rose petals and came to a halt in the real centre of the studio: the artist’s easel. On it was standing a painting that was not yet finished but which appealed to me more than the others, even so. A young girl stared out at me from the canvas. She was wearing an everyday dress with no frills and furbelows, and there was nothing else to distract attention from a face that was anything but everyday. She had a sharp, elfin chin, large green eyes and ears that stuck out, making her look more like that mischievous sprite Puck than an ordinary girl. Her unusual appearance was crowned with red hair. She looked really special but did not seem very happy

about it. Her cat-like eyes stared defiantly at the world, as though she couldn't bear to be looked at.

'That painting should appeal to you,' said Trops, appearing suddenly at my side.

I took a step back. 'Why is that?' I asked.

'A portrait of an innocent young girl. True to life, as if she's just stepped onto the canvas. No strange clothes. No unusual theme. Nothing at all out of the ordinary. Yes, the philistines will love this.'

To deny him any satisfaction, I turned away from the portrait of the cat girl. 'I don't really care for paintings,' I said.

Trops chuckled and flopped with a thud onto a purple sofa. 'Then we will have to change all that, my dear boy. I find it intolerable that such shockingly bad taste should be lurking behind such an artistic appearance.'

He opened a cigarette case that was lying among the cushions and offered me a cigarette. 'I propose that you become my pupil. *Ma jeune protégé*. A novice in my school of the black arts. An acolyte of Augustus Polycarp Trops, high priest of the Temple of Decadence. Well, how say you? Are you prepared to sell me your soul?'

He was so pompous and ridiculous that I forgave him his ulterior motive. 'My soul is yours in exchange for a cheese and ham sandwich, Trops. I haven't yet had breakfast.'

He looked at me thoughtfully as I drew on my cigarette. The world was spinning around me but I didn't want him to see that.

'You've grown thinner, Adrian.'

'So it would appear.'

Confound it, there was no need for him to stare at me so with those anxious cow eyes of his. I had come there on business. And for a substantial breakfast. It was high time that I set the wheels in motion.

'I want to talk to you, Trops. About posing for you. But I can't talk on an empty stomach. What have you got in that basket?'

Trops chuckled, as if he was getting more pleasure from me every minute. ‘So that’s it, is it? A young man drops in unannounced and immediately starts to make demands! It’s fortunate for you, Adrian, that in your case I am disposed to comply with them all. I shall see what I can find to set before you.’

It turned out to be the strangest breakfast I had ever eaten. Because every table in the studio was cluttered with artistic objects of all kinds, Trops laid a tablecloth on the sofa and spread the food there like a picnic. There were warm French rolls, fresh from the baker’s oven, together with creamy Brie and chunks of chocolate that mingled together in the mouth to produce a peculiar sweet-crisp porridge that I washed down with mouthfuls of black coffee.

After I had wolfed down four rolls, I began to feel better. A bit sick, perhaps, but better all the same.

‘That girl with the green eyes,’ I said, pointing to the picture on the easel. ‘Is she an artist’s model?’

‘No, no,’ answered Trops, spreading a croissant with flamboyant gestures. He even turned this into a theatrical event. ‘She is a real young lady with a father who has too much money and too little taste and who wants a beautiful portrait of his little girl. A businessman. A respectable gentleman. Yes, Augustus Trops must satisfy such deities if he is to earn a crust. It’s a sad world, Adrian, is it not?’

‘So that’s why you are a painter of portraits. A painter of *crusts*,’ I said teasingly.

‘Only during office hours.’ He smiled broadly. ‘After that, I am Nero, Judas, Louis the Fourteenth and the Emperor of Japan. I have a particularly rich secret life, Adrian.’

I took another look at the skull with the hookah – it had two green marbles for eyes – and agreed that Trops’ secret life must be anything but dull. But there was no reason why it should be my life also. I was only there to earn money, not to be lured into a tarnished fairy tale world for adults. I had to make that clear once and for all.

‘I would like to pose for you,’ I said. ‘But I warn you, I am expensive and I must insist on certain conditions.’

Trops smiled and brushed crumbs from his beard. ‘That’s exactly what I expected! And if I don’t abide by those conditions, I’ll soon know all about it, no doubt.’

I grinned too, in spite of myself. ‘I want at least five shillings a time, and I must always keep my clothes on.’

Trops nodded.

‘And I need somewhere to stay for the next few days. Have you got a spare bed?’

Trops nodded again. ‘Yes, I have a spare bed,’ he said calmly, ‘but you can always share mine if you want.’

I shook my head, just as calmly, as if we were carrying on a perfectly ordinary conversation. But I was glad it was all out in the open. Each of us now knew what to expect from the other, how we were to deal with each other during the next few days. Now that it was all settled, I felt much more at ease. Nothing else could go wrong. I had taken the first step on the road to an assignation with a goddess of beauty from the Prince of Wales Theatre.

‘Good,’ said Trops, rising to his feet. ‘Then let us get down to work immediately. I would like to make a few simple sketches to start with, Adrian, just to get to know you better – as a model, that is. And while we were talking I had an idea that I want to try straight away. Now, if you wouldn’t mind standing up...’

He waddled to a curtain that concealed an alcove in the rear wall of the studio. He swept it to one side, and I saw that the alcove was a sort of wardrobe, with many different costumes hanging from a rod, each covered with a sheet. A fancy dress collection.

Trops selected one of the garments, pulled the sheet from it and brought it over to me. ‘Would you just like to try this?’

It was a theatrical costume that had seen better days *before* the moths had got hold of it. The sort of costume worn by Hamlet when he's thinking about suicide. Black, with the occasional silver thread. A cloak went with it, the shoulders decorated with the dandruff of the previous owner.

Trops held it up in front of me and gave it a critical look. 'It should just about fit. And it will look better in the picture, anyway. Which just goes to show that Art is always superior to Reality.'

I made a huffing sound, as if to say, 'What nonsense you do talk sometimes.' But I was enjoying the game just as much as he was. That's how it used to be with Gloria. We played games with life to make it more attractive than it really was. London changed into Darkest Africa. I was going to change into – what?

'I have in mind an initiation. A novice kneeling for his first black mass in the temple of Satan. Thin, pale, with as much fear as curiosity in his eyes. Staring up at the masked priest who will disclose all the secrets to him. Snakes at his feet. Or should they be lizards? Yes, lizards, I think, emerald green lizards. Can't you just picture it?'

I made a genuine attempt to imagine the whole fantastic scene. 'Well – to be perfectly honest – no.'

Laughing, Trops waggled a finger in front of my nose. 'Just put these clothes on to start with. And listen to what I have to say. Then we'll see if you can identify with it.'

'What have you got to tell me?' I asked.

'Everything. Too much. All my secrets. Everything about the black arts. *My* black arts. I feel sure I can use them to open your eyes once and for all.'

'We'll see about that,' I said, and began to pull on the costume over my clothes.

[Pages 287-297]

That evening I found Charles Parker in front of the mirror in the bedroom at 13 Little College Street, straightening his tie with all the concentration of a Buddhist monk. I was already dressed up to the nines, and I sat down on a stool beside a mattress on the floor, extremely proud of the crease in my trousers, which I had pressed by laying them under a pile of books.

‘Looking forward to the party?’ I asked.

Charles pursed his lips. ‘Not particularly. Are you?’

I watched as he slipped a ring on his finger. A pretty expensive one, by the look of it.

‘I don’t know,’ I said in answer to his question. ‘I’m not used to this sort of party. Are they fun?’

‘It all depends on who the guests are. And how much they’ve got to spend.’

‘Who’s coming?’

He looked at my reflection in the mirror. ‘Invited guests. Fellows who like dressing up for a party.’

A hesitant smile spread across his face, as though he had just remembered something but wasn’t sure whether I’d find it amusing or not. ‘Would you like to see something?’

‘What?’

He crossed to the wardrobe and beckoned to me. When I was standing beside him, he opened the door. ‘Look,’ he whispered. ‘Isn’t it *beautiful*?’

He reached inside and a torrent of blue silk and gold sequins tumbled over his arm. It was a dress. A lovely Oriental thousand-and-one-nights costume. It was so beautiful that it was impossible to feel anything but admiration for it. Even I wanted to wear it.

‘Whose is that?’ I was whispering too as I caressed the cloth.

‘Mr Taylor’s. I’ve seen him wear it a couple of times when we’ve been to parties and so on. He’s also got a wig and silk stockings. They cost the *earth*!’

I didn't say anything for a moment. The idea of Mr Taylor in a dress like this seemed somehow ridiculous. On the other hand...

'Have you slept with him?' I asked before I could stop myself.

'Yes,' Charles answered softly. 'I think that we've all slept with him at one time or other.'

A silence fell, during which I looked over my shoulder at the mattress, at the sheets, the pillows...

'Do you like sleeping with men?' I asked.

He bit his lip. 'You know, I'm not really sure if I do or not.' Then his face brightened. 'But just so long as they pay me, you won't hear me complain!'

I let the cloth fall from my hand and the dress slid back into the wardrobe. Sequins glittered in the darkness like small stars.

'The money's terrific,' Charles went on. 'Sometimes I think to myself that I'd like to do something different. Go on the stage perhaps. But then I always think – but not yet, not yet. Just as long as there are fellows who'll pay me lots of money because they think I'm a handsome chap, I'd be mad to go and look for a different job, wouldn't I? I just *love* the money, Charlie. I adore spending all that money.'

He showed me the ring. 'A few days ago I got thirty pounds from – someone. I bought this ring with it and a few other things too. And now the money's all spent so I'm going to a party...'

He took a final glance in the mirror and picked up his coat. At the door he linked his arm in mine. 'And how about you? Feeling nervous?'

'Course not,' I answered, but my face probably spoke volumes.

'Don't worry about it,' said Charles. 'I nearly died of nerves the first time. Just one tip, though: try not to show it. We're doing this because we enjoy it. It's important that the clients know that. It puts them at their ease. It gives them the chance to have a good time. We're there to have *fun*.'

'So we're going to have *fun* tonight?'

'We're going to have lots and lots of fun.'

‘We’re approaching a site of historical importance,’ Mr Taylor said as the taxi left Oxford Street and turned into Newman Street.

‘Really? How’s that?’ I asked. Up until then I’d been studying the love-bite on Charles’ neck, just visible above his collar and thinly disguised by a layer of powder. Now I was startled out of my nervous daze by the voice of our escort, who had apparently suddenly taken on the role of tourist guide. And if you look to your right you can see...

‘Newman Street runs into Cleveland Street. Surely you’ve heard of Cleveland Street?’

That I couldn’t deny, but not in connection with anything special. What had happened there? A murder? A spectacular diamond robbery?

‘The Cleveland Street Scandal. Never heard of it? Oh, Charlie!’

‘It was in all the papers about five years ago,’ Charles explained. ‘Even I can remember it and I was still polishing shoes for him upstairs in those days.’

‘It’s a story with a moral,’ said Mr Taylor. ‘Now listen carefully, Mr Rosebery, and make sure you learn from it.’

I pulled a face. ‘Crikey, must I?’

His reaction was very serious, much to my surprise. ‘Don’t think for one moment that I’m telling you this because it’s just a pleasant little anecdote. It’s really extremely serious. And I do have a responsibility for your welfare, after all.’

I gave a loud sniff. How kind of you to care, Papa Pimp!

‘It all started with an unfortunate coincidence. The police were investigating a theft at the Central Telegraph Office. A telegram delivery boy had been caught with eighteen shillings in his pocket, several times more than his weekly wage. It goes without saying that the detectives wanted to know how he came by it and so they questioned him. The boy was terrified, of course, and so he told the truth: he’d earned the money in a house in Cleveland Street by going to bed with men. Well, the police lost no time in raiding the house. They made several arrests and

during the questioning that followed certain names were named. Names with a price tag attached, Charlie. Aristocratic names. Royal names even.'

'Lord Arthur Somerset. Prince Eddy, the son of the Prince of Wales,' Charles added.

'Among others. Of course it all had to be swept under the carpet as quickly as possible. After all, the police were working for none other than Her Majesty Queen Victoria, weren't they? So it looked as though the whole business would be quickly forgotten until one of those damned newspaper fellows got wind of it.'

'It was the *North London Press*, that's where it first appeared,' Charles remembered.

'There were sensational reports full of suspicions, insinuations, suggestions. But nothing concrete. Questions were asked, such as why had the accused been given such lenient sentences? Why hadn't the police made further arrests? Was there a whiff of conspiracy about it all? The press wasted no time getting on the trail. Mention was made of the involvement of "the heir of an earl and the youngest son of an earl" and even "a person of even higher rank". Well, the readers soon filled in the names for themselves and the affair exploded: front-page articles, lawsuits, questions in the House. A certain Member of Parliament had a field day: how long had the prime minister known about it and had he been shielding certain persons? Fortunately the affair was too delicate for a further investigation to be set up and after a month or two everything returned to normal. With only a slight loss of income.'

I wondered what the moral of the story could be, and said as much.

'The moral,' Mr Taylor explained calmly, 'is that there are three groups of people who are not to be trusted: the police, journalists and politicians. So stay out of the way of the first two and make sure you get the third in your clutches.' He looked out of the taxi window. 'Ah, we're here.'

We had arrived outside a large house with curtained windows. Only the basement windows were lit up. Piano music was coming from inside. I waited with Charles while Mr Taylor paid the taxi.

‘What happened to those people who were arrested in Cleveland Street?’ I asked him.

‘They got four to nine months hard labour,’ he answered. ‘They were lucky.’
‘*Lucky?*’ I looked at his face to see if he meant it. He did mean it.

We joined a party that was already well under way. It was just like Bonny Reilly’s first ball in miniature. Princes and kings in fashionable well-tailored evening dress, mainly in traditional black but also in soft white or cream shades that gave the wearers the appearance of unearthly fairy tale apparitions. I couldn’t believe my eyes, and followed Charles through the basement with the dazed expression of a debutante being presented at court for the first time. I knew that I must have looked rather stupid but I just couldn’t stop gaping. I gave a wide berth to two older men who were standing in the centre of the room with their lips glued together. A guest in a daffodil-yellow dress with more lace and ribbons than I had ever seen on a woman accidentally brushed against my arm. He mumbled an apology but I pretended not to notice and stared after him as he made his way on high heels among the guests, two full glasses of wine in his hands. Mr Taylor had crossed to a group of men standing round the piano. A young man had just struck up a waltz, and a few of the guests started to dance. Charles took me by the arm and dragged me over to a table on which an extensive buffet was set out.

‘Eat first,’ he said. ‘There’s no way of telling if you’ll get another chance this evening.’

He scooped three helpings of vanilla ice cream into a dish and piled a plate high with biscuits, cakes and jellies. I couldn’t eat a thing and so I left the tempting buffet well alone. I could see Mr Taylor over by the piano, talking to a man who was staring at us over his shoulder. He had a ridiculous little coiled moustache. I decided to keep well out of his sight by mingling with the other guests. Beside the buffet there stood a small two-seater couch that was occupied by just one person. He was a fair, wiry man of indeterminate age, in a black suit.

He looked comparatively normal, apart from his wavy hair that was long enough to be tied into a pigtail if he had been an eighteenth century nobleman. I decided to try my luck with him.

‘Hullo,’ I said. ‘Do you mind if I sit here?’

He regarded me with light blue eyes that went perfectly with his fair hair. ‘I wouldn’t dream of minding,’ he said. ‘Blasted piano music,’ he added.

‘Don’t you care for piano music, sir?’ I asked superfluously.

‘My sister plays the piano,’ he answered gloomily. ‘Every single hour of the day, God help us.’ He lapsed into a moody silence, but then remembered that he, like me, was there to have fun.

‘Allow me to introduce myself. Thomas Coombes.’ He stretched out his hand as if it was the hand of a lady that I was expected to kiss. And so I did. Then I burst out laughing because it seemed such a ridiculous thing to have done, and luckily he did too.

‘I’m Charlie Rosebery,’ I said. ‘Champagne Charlie.’ The name seemed an ideal choice for an evening such as this.

‘But you haven’t *got* any champagne!’ He sounded almost shocked.

‘Alas, no. But perhaps you will get some for me?’

‘Of course, without fail. I know, I’ll find a whole bottle!’

I smiled as he jumped to his feet to suit the word to the deed. My God, he’s taken a shine to me, I thought.

Thomas was soon back, with a bottle and a glass for us to share. He filled the glass for me and watched as I raised it to my lips. As I drank, I looked at the men on the dance floor. Taylor had introduced Charles to the fellow with the moustache. The two of them were dancing now, very close together as was only proper with a waltz.

‘I don’t really care for this sort of party,’ Thomas said. ‘The music is invariably commonplace. Polkas and so on. It’s almost as if one were at some

ghastly music hall or other. Besides, I'm not really much of a dancer. What about you?'

I thought back to those free Saturday afternoons, ruined for me by the dancing lessons that Ma considered to be essential for our 'education'. I could see myself now, whirling round with Mary Ann, with Ma's voice ringing in my ears: 'One, two, close! Good. And *turn!*' I hadn't been a bad pupil, just a particularly unwilling one.

'If you don't want to dance, then I won't dance either,' I said.

Thomas grinned and took a sip from the glass. I hesitated, uncertain what I was supposed to do next. Take his hand or something?

'I dare to wager that you're an outstanding dancer and that you've held a great many ladies in your arms.'

I wondered exactly what he meant by 'ladies', the genuine article or the imitation. But the answer was no in both cases.

'No? Really, Charlie?'

At the piano, meanwhile, a changing of the guard had taken place. Mr Taylor was now seated at the keyboard and had announced a quadrille.

'Oh God, I really don't think I can bear it,' Thomas groaned. 'Shall we go somewhere else, Charlie?'

'Why not?' I said, and got to my feet. I had a strange feeling in my stomach, as if it were filled to the brim with Charles' jellies.

As we made our way through the dancers to the door, Thomas slipped an arm around my waist. I felt his hip against mine, his muscles, flesh and bones. It was strange but not unpleasant. A body moving beside mine. Not any particular man, not a personality, just a body. A body whose structure and movements were familiar to me, because it was identical to mine. I knew that I could never love a different kind of body.

I marvelled at the pride and self-assurance with which Thomas moved among the guests. Whenever he stopped for a moment to greet an acquaintance, his hand remained where it was, sometimes drawing me even closer to him. I realised that

he wasn't ashamed, that he had no *cause* to be ashamed. Here there was no need for a hand or an arm to be concealed beneath an overcoat or for kisses to be stolen in the dark.

I am Thomas Coombes and this is my boy. Is he not beautiful?

I walked beside him as if in a fevered dream, looking people straight in the eyes. I was too self-conscious and too brazen perhaps, but this was the first time that this had happened to me. The first time that I had no need to feel ashamed.

We went up two flights of stairs and Thomas tried a couple of doors. The third one was standing open and I saw that it led into a bedroom. There was a bed, much finer and more luxurious than the mattress in Little College Street. It was covered with a red counterpane.

Thomas was standing close beside me. I was aware that he was trying to catch my eye. I looked at the counterpane; it was the colour of a king's cloak.

'I want to spoon with you,' he said with an old-fashioned turn of phrase.

'Two pounds,' I answered automatically.

'That's fine,' he said. 'I'll give you two pounds with pleasure.'

He stepped into the room and stretched out his hand to invite me inside. Smiling, I complied and let him pull me to him for a long kiss. Then Thomas closed the door behind us.

I had taken off my jacket before I lay down on the bed, and loosened my tie. I had hesitated over my socks. Socks in bed were anything but exciting but long trousers and bare feet were hardly appealing either. So I had kept them on and was lying now with my knees raised, waiting for Thomas. My heart was racing like a repeating clock out of control. I was so very nervous. On those previous occasions with Trops I had always been befuddled, either with drink or with opium. This time I hadn't drunk nearly enough. Not even a full glass of champagne. Everything that was about to happen would be sharp and real, and I would never forget it as long as I lived.

Thomas came and sat on the bed. His shirt was unbuttoned. I saw a smooth chest with hard nipples. He wasn't wearing an undershirt.

I gave a sigh.

All Thomas said was, 'Yes.'

Then he leaned forward and kissed me firmly. I kissed him back, put my arms around him and slipped my hand under his shirt. I had to jump in at the deep end now. I would worry later whether I could swim or not.

Thomas was a good kisser. That made it a whole lot easier and I allowed him as many kisses as he wanted. At the same time I was conscious of his hand sneaking under my shirt and then a finger sliding under the waistband of my trousers. I sat up and looked at him, propped up against the pillows. I knew that my face must have been a mirror image of his. Blotched, flushed, with swollen lips.

He thought that I was enticing him, and so he leaned forward and put his hand on my groin. I was aware of his fingers, touching, feeling, clasping my penis.

He started to hiccup with laughter. 'Just checking the quality of the merchandise, Charlie.'

The feeble joke sent him into a fit of laughter and I could feel laughter bubbling up in my stomach too. It merged with another sensation down below and before I could stop myself I was shaking with pleasure and excitement.

'Take them off,' I said to Thomas, with a nod at my trousers. 'Take those blasted things off.'

Soon we were laying there, our bodies pressed together, his warm throbbing penis clasped between my thighs, our ankles in a tangle of trousers and drawers.

Thomas' breath was warm against my ear. 'Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.' And so on and so on. I had forgotten what his name was and simply moaned to the rhythm of his words. It was wonderful. It was really bloody glorious.

I reached for a corner of the red counterpane and tried to pull it over us.

Let me be your cloak. Let me cover you, slide across your skin, enfold you...

At that moment I became aware of a great deal of noise downstairs. There was a lot of yelling going on, but among all the shouting there just one word that I understood only too well: ‘Coppers!’

I felt Thomas’ heart miss a beat. With one bound he leaped to his feet, fell flat on his face, pulled up his trousers and managed to reach the door with yet another bound. He turned the key in the lock and leaned against the door, his hand clutching his throat.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph,’ he whispered.

‘What’s happening?’ I shouted, covering my groin with the bedclothes.

He couldn’t even speak.

‘Police?’

He nodded and then ran to the window. He flung it open, leaned out and then staggered giddily backwards.

I heard someone come thundering up the stairs. I had just enough time to haul up my trousers and grab my shoes from the floor.

The bedroom was on the first floor at the rear of the house. It was a jump of about four metres, landing in a bed of geraniums. Below us I could hear someone fumbling at the back door. From that door to the fence and possible escape was a distance of ten metres or so.

Someone was tugging at the handle of the bedroom door.

‘Open up! Open the door!’

I jumped out of the window without stopping to think about broken bones. It was a hard landing but the geraniums suffered more damage than I did. Just as I was scrambling to my feet, the back door burst open.

‘Here! Here’s another one! Grab him, he’s trying to do a bunk.’

I had hardly taken more than a couple of steps when I felt a hand on my neck dragging me back as though I were a stray dog. I saw a dark police uniform and struggled to get free. The image of Leicester Square three months ago, just outside the Empire, danced before my eyes. They’d put up a good fight then,

Charles, Nettles and the rest. But there was no chance that I'd get away like they did... Just one evening of Life would probably get me sent down for two years.

But then something happened. Thomas Coombes had decided to jump after all. He landed right on the back of the policeman who had me by the collar. All three of us ended up in the geranium bed. I took advantage of the two or three seconds of confusion to tear myself free. After that, it wasn't difficult. I can run fast, thanks to my long legs, and so I easily kept ahead of that old puffing steam engine of a policeman. I hurled myself over the fence, sent one more kick in his direction, and was free. Without looking round, I ran until I could run no more.