Chapter I
Birth—Family Origins—Childhood—Failure to Apply Himself to his Studies—First Commission—Manchester Free School—Return to Service

As I am wont to tell it, and what I tell is wont to be true, I was born on the afternoon of the19th of July in 1771 when the sky was clear, and a rare north-easterly wind was banking the waves of the Irish Sea against the coast and driving them through the mouth of the estuary and up the marge of Malahide beach to brine the tufts of dune grass, deposit their froth among the hummocks and roll back, the fourth son of Richard Talbot Esq. and Margaret, not yet, but in due time to become, 1st Baroness Talbot of Malahide, destined myself neither for title, unless by a sequence of unhappy accidents I had neither the cruelty nor the fortitude to effect, nor for glory that was not of my own making.

My eldest brother, Richard, ascended to parliament, and, when my mother died, took her title and with it a seat in the House of Lords, which he held with honour until he joined her. Long of face as a boy, longer still as a man, as long and cold as a greyhound's nose, and always slow to speak. I see his fingers now, how he raised a single digit to his cheek as if to interject, but held his peace: his shadow fell more readily on his acquaintances than his words, all of which edified, but never with a measure of tenderness.

He was succeeded in the Barony by my second brother James for a brief year. And brief James was, for I cannot say I knew him as more than an amanuensis to Richard, as a pale and still more reserved extension of our elder brother's shadow, matching him in everything but exceeding him in nothing, always the smaller man, and more inscrutable for that smallness. He followed Richard in his ventures and opinions to his title and just as surely from that to his death. But all tenures are written in the rolls of time, no matter their brevity, or, indeed, their redundancy, and my second brother's is no exception.

My third brother John knew his mind with a clarity I could only hope to emulate, and so made his singular way to fame and thus to fortune, both of which grew in proportion to his years and without interruption: he joined the navy as a warrant office and did not tell a soul until he his blue coat was fitted and he had orders to sail for the West Indies with Horatio Neilson. A short decade later he was a post captain on the HMS Eurydice, taking ships, how many I have no urge to count, in the English Channel. Thence to the HMS Glenmore, the HMS Leander, his first command with which he captured the French frigate Ville de Millan and liberated the HMS Cleopatra in the Caribbean, the HMS Centaur, his first ship of the line, the HMS Thunderer, which he sailed to acclaim, although not to victory, against the fortifications at Constantinople in the doomed Dardanelles operation, and the HMS Victorious, which he kept true to its name until he retired to land. For the bravery with which he bore his lone wound, he received a gold medal, one of no more than two score pinned to captains in the war, and lived the remainder of his life as a country gentleman in a manor house on his estate in Dorset, advancing in rank as he did through ships, dying an admiral and a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Bath, mourned as deeply by those who knew him as those who did not.

And I? I came into the world as inauspiciously as I have determined to leave it. I was born a pauper of prospects. I will soon rattle out my ultimate breath, far from the home into which I was brought by the midwife's hands, further still from the one I built for myself, as good as a pauper, in a narrow bed, in another man's house, surrounded by friends I have ceased to understand and strangers I cannot fathom, sunk at the end of my life in the wilds of a world that never learned my name. But between that first nadir and this last, I have written out three lives entire, and bent the men of history to the metal of my pen.

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Talbot. The name that I have given to three roads, a port and the settlement I have built, in the early days with my own blistered hands, cared for as it grew with the same fierce determination with which I built it, and lost as I wished to lose it, that name belongs neither to Ireland, the island of my birth, nor to England, the island of my loyalties, but to France, the country which I loath more than any in the world, and which I have opposed at every turn with more force than I expended against the virgin forests of the land in which I established myself. It is a Norman name, and a noble one withal.

A Talbot crossed the channel with William the Conqueror and fought alongside him in the mud at Hastings. Richard de Talbot of Shrewsbury was the first of my line to be recorded in history. He bore, as do all us Talbots, the French name over which I trip, but was an English knight born and bred to his Shropshire bones. He served Henry II with honour in his adventure in Ireland, for which young Richard—and he was by what accounts remain smooth of face and clear of eye, as much a boy as a man when he took to ship at Pembroke, although broad shouldered and firm of hand for all his youth—was granted the lands of Malahide, which his descendants have held without interruption for some seven hundred years, receiving in due time the title of Lord High Admiral of Malahide and the Seas Adjoining.

Why the Seas? Why that restless element? The salty ocean waters on which men sail, but over which no mortal man, no matter his title, may hold sway?

Talbots are twice conquerors, true. Three times if you count my conquest of the forest, and I do. But it is the blood of planters, of the men who crossed the seas to set themselves first in Shrewsbury and them in Malahide, where they raised a castle to be their seat and did not move, that runs strongest through our veins. Talbots have been stayers for generations I do not care to number. We built once but no more. The castle stands. The lands remain. All in its place. The stones. And fields. And fence rows. The garden in which I gambolled as a child. All as it was and will be. Talbots are care takers, returners, diggers in and holders on by both inheritance and disposition. And it is a homebound, sedentary liquid that courses through my brothers' vessels and beats out its constant rhythm in their living hearts. Even John left his homeland but to serve it, returned forthwith when his duty was done, and has not thought to leave its shores since he stepped off the gangplank of his last command onto the pier at Portsmouth.

And I? Why was I, of all my brothers, fated to leave my homeland behind? To return a

On the morning of the 22nd of February in 1812, a day's sail out of Venice, the Victorious turns with the wind and my brother's orders into the path of the newly built and freshly launched French ship the Rivoli and a maelstrom that lasts five endless hours, loading the pure air of the Adriatic with a hell of smoke and the thunder of one hundred and forty-eight cannon firing relentlessly. The fume envelops the ships in terror. The Rivoli's rigging dreadfully shattered. The French ship lolling to a fatal drift. The decks of both awash with the carnage of battle. Imagine it however you will. It is worse. Men broken. Men mauled by shot. Mangle by ball. An unlucky canon blast to the rail of the Victorious carries a hail of needle-sharp splinters, daggers of wood, swords withal, whole tortured billets, towards where my brother stands amidst the melee, tall and fearless, his feet settled wide on the shuddering deck, commanding with his courage as much as with his words that are shouted and lost, shouted and repeated in the tumult. These ragged arrows ~~catch him square in the throat, open a gash to his spine from which his courageous life fountains forth in a fatal stream, sending him to death instead of rewards, and sealing his fate as a footnote to history, a name on the roles of ships captains, less than a minor player, with no heirs to remember his exploits as more than meager, and make of him a hero~~ miss him all but one. The ball sends the sound of death with its storm of horror through the empty air above his brave head and nothing more than a splinter into him. Not a mortal blow. But near as like. Felt as a dizzying shock to the face. And then a sudden incandescent flame from jawbone to crown. As of a canon flash seen too close and through unshielded eyes. He is carved clean, sore stricken by the sticker, stumbles into the man next to him—Who?—No matter—and thence into senselessness for several days. He carries the sole wound of his career with the captured French ship back to England. A scar, deep but not disfiguring, a relic of his fearlessness, with which to woo a young wife and delight his children in his dotage.

handful of times, but never to tarry, always to leave again? To be drawn elsewhere by a force I can no more explain than I can unravel that other mystery of my being? To leap continents as freely as the words leap from my pen? Why was a nullity at birth given this strange power to pile up events before me like so many dressed and well hewn logs? To raise them one atop another until I made a home of history? To wrench it down? To rebuild and amend once more? And yet again? To rest in time but never in satisfaction? Was it the sea that climbed the dunes on the day of my birth and washed its sublime restlessness into my soul? The wind that blew from the north-east as if to unmoor me and send me scudding like an errant cloud across the ocean? Which made me as transcendent and mercurial as those high flung fumes? No. The waves lifted and crashed as they often did and were no more than water. The wind blew likewise on other days. It blows from the same compass point today, comes over land from the town that bears my first name in a ceaseless rush of leaves, rattles the shutters and rolls the white flecked swells into the iron of Lake Erie. In its breath I hear no answer, only the gusting repetition of the question.

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Why? Long have I pondered this, but without application, in passing moments, with a lightness that allowed me to be drawn away by the slightest of distractions, a studied flippancy, one might call it, and never at great length, as if to touch the matter too firmly would dispel that which raised it, leave me destitute in a world I had only half made, and lead to greater tragedies withal. Now, my work not done, but ending all the same, my great acts behind me, a few minor transformations to effect, but nothing decisive, Wellesley retired for two years and approaching the same fate as I, my chosen and created heir well placed, and my colony grown beyond the need of my care, I turn my attention to the past, not to discover the secrets of the present, but to find the keys to the future it contained. I need not justify my life. What I have wrought does that well enough. But I wish to know it in its fullness, to solve the mystery of my existence and see myself entire before I end. I sit here in a cabin whose weathered logs I dressed and set myself, at a worn table I likewise carved with my own hands.

Outside, the lake rehearses its permutations. The water ever-changing, but never more or less than what it is: tonight, a black and softly rustling fastness beyond the open windows.

All is in readiness: the lamp is trimmed. The scissors are freshly sharpened, and a pot of glue sits next to them. The glass at my elbow is filled to the brim with a fine Bourgogne. The bottle waits to be finished on the board. The journals I have kept for almost sixty years are on a shelf in easy reach. George MacBeth is a short drive away in London, Jeffrey Hunter, my trusted manservant is closer still, and my first and best friend is before me in my thoughts. I fill my well. I dip my pen. And set myself to words one final time.

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My childhood was as unremarkable and inauspicious as my birth, commonplace in character, distinguished, if at all, by its regular measures of happiness and disappointment, and the decided absence of a definitive event. As ordinary as it was, I remember it well: the playroom whose windows faced east and were often thrown open to the honey light and cloud shadow of a summer's day. The salt that mixed liberally with the garden air. The blue ball, wooden, banded in white, a lone survivor from a lost lawn billiards set, whose fissures and chips I traced with my fingers, learned by heart, made familiar, almost painful, with my intimacies. I feel it now. Its weight and heft. The grain beneath the wearing paint.

I rolled it down the grand staircase, thump, thump, thumping on the steps, each echoing impact at once delighting me with its loudness and bringing me closer to the realization of what

You can learn to make fire, or you can begone. And you will begone right quick if you do not learn. You need first a flint. Thumb sized or larger to make for easy striking. Steel of course. The back of a knife is best. An ax head will do if you have nothing else. And then your tinder, which is no less essential than your flint, and must be guarded with unwavering care against the weather. I prefer a tix box sealed tight against the ingress of both air and water—my own has served me for some forty years, and rests now, as I write, in the inside pocket of the sheepskin coat I close against the chill washing through the open windows—but an oiled leather wallet will do as well, providing you tie it firmly closed, and shield it from the rain. For tinder, you wish to find good punk wood. Some say that resinous cedar is best, and it works well enough, but I have found from long experience that sugar maple is superior by far. You want a tree that has lain for some two winters and is fully dry. Split the trunk to reach the heart wood which is rose in color, a blush which deepens towards the centre of the log and is often a second, readily distinguishable rust cylinder inside the white and vibrant exterior rings of the log. It should be fibrous and dusty to the touch, light, not as air, but like as much, and not crumbling. If you can break it by hand with ease, or crush it with your fingers into powder, it is rotten and of no use. Cut a piece to fit your tinderbox. Palm-sized. Larger is cumbersome to carry with you. Smaller lights a fire or two before it is used up. Blacken it in a flame so that it is as dark as coal, not burnt up, but you will think it close enough. Close it in your tinderbox with your flint and keep it always on your person. Fire is life and the spending of it. To lose your flint or tinder, to dampen your punk into a useless mush, is to lose your hope and throw yourself on the mercy of others, and you must learn to light your own flames as you will, and fend for yourself in all things.

I had done in my boyhood hubris, landing soft to roll to a standstill on the rug.

Father gave me his belt, but no harder than love dictated. Nurse fed my soreness with seedcake, and the orb, which I had seen my father snatch up from where it lay several floors below me, reappeared without a word among my playthings the next day.

I tucked it into the folds of my clothes, buttoned it there, so as to feel it hard and constant, a comforting hurt, against the softness of my flesh. I cannot say how long I carried it like this. The fancy passed as all childhood fancies do, becoming as inexplicable as it was once essential, the ball forgotten in the toybox.

I grew, of course, and joined my brothers in their games: four corners in the playroom. Hide and seek in the garden. I tucked myself into the hollow bowl of an oak. Soft dust of wood rot for a cushion. Smell of it sharp and dry in my nose. Time passed, or moved, but not for me where I lay with my knees drawn to my chest. Silent hunting. Footsteps passed below. Circled back. Soon voices called my name. Near and then far and then near again. Nurse joined my brothers, and, wilful as I was, I did not emerge until they had taken their search to the shore, their weakened shouts had been lost to the wind, and the garden was still once more.

I cannot recall if they were glad or relieved to find me, if nurse cuffed or caressed me when, my brothers in tow when she came upon me kicking a ball across the lawn as if I had been there all along.

I told no one my secret, and returned to that dark container with regularity, hid in it to escape from lessons or the overbearance of my older brothers, once to delay my father's belt, prickling with the knowledge that every minute that passed would magnify my punishment, often for no other reason than the peculiar and melancholy pleasure of burying myself beyond discovery, until I could no longer fit my growing limbs to its confines, no matter how tightly I folded my knees to my chin.

We sent the same ball nurse had found me kicking in clumsy and then more confident arcs between sticks we had hammered into the earth. Always two against two. The configurations changing according to our wont.

We charged over the turf. Together into a line of American rebels we had brought to bay at White Plains, brandishing imaginary sabres, vying beforehand to be the brave Lord William Howe and lead the attack, or towards each other with a solemn, boyish seriousness, real branches raised, brought down to clack on each other, sting knuckles, bruise arms, once split an eyebrow. The excitement of something close to combat sickened from exhilaration to tears and hurt and John's outraged assaults on Richard, hopeless against the larger boy and unrelenting because of it.

Hours of sourness followed these encounters, during which we kept apart, sulked, hot still with temper, holding our wounds, touching a purpling finger, a lump here or there, and rehearsing the blows that had been dealt to us, troubled withal, although we hardly dared to think it, by the blows we had dealt out. But the bruises faded with sleep. The resentments were likewise forgotten the next morning. All was new again as it is each day of childhood. And the lure of valour drew us inevitably back to battle.

A fallen log in the woods beyond the garden, its length rising gently through the dappled light, its sides woolly with moss, its top polished slick as a wet deck by our shoes, served as a ship of the line. We took our turns boarding and repelling boarders. The defeated parties were forced to walk the plank. In a rare, and even more rarely to be repeated instance of initiative, James had filched a plank from the carpenter's shed, run it nearly two of mine and one of my eldest brother's strides over the lip of the ravine into which the gardeners dumbed their barrows, and recruited John and I—even then Richard would have none of ideas that were not his own—to anchor the opposite end with a boulder. It was all the three of us could do with our tiny arms and as of yet crude knowledge of levers to roll it into place, but roll it we did. I remember still the gratifying burn where its rough surface scored my hands and the delight of heaving with all my might, feeling it teeter, lift free of our hands, and fall to its rest. The result of our exertions was a springy length of wood that served as an ideal platform from which to leap onto a bed of leaves and lawn clippings.

I do not know how we were not found out. Why it stayed there, year after year, succumbing, if I were to guess, and I must, to decay before falling to my father's common sense I cannot say. The gardeners could not but have seen it. Did they think it beyond them? Or did my father allow us this singular secret? Was he charmed by our ingenuity? Did it remind him of a fancy from his youth and touch him into indulgence? Whatever the case may be, that board was a durable and lasting for us as the broad log on which we rallied back and forth.

I suspected then, and do still, that my brothers sometimes lost for the pleasure of that fall, to which we assigned a solemn dignity, and reserved only for the vanquished in our games, never for simple play. I cannot say I did the same. I was defeated far more than I won. I was the youngest. I was the smallest. And I could not muster John's relentless determination. I deserved my losses, but they smarted all the same, and left me with the conviction that the handful of victories I managed, no matter how hard fought, were gifted to me by my brothers, or, worse still, by the vicissitudes of luck. I could never take any more than grudging delight in that plunge into the spongy mound and preferred by far those few moments when, in the midst of a melee whose all but inevitable conclusion seemed as far off as the day we would grow into the heroes we pretended to be, I mastered the brother who was before me, and felt myself ascendent.

I emerged from these years a boy like any other, unformed, or formed in a shape sufficiently commonplace that I was indistinguishable in any way from countless other lads. I was a type, rather than an individual. Even my longing to be more than what I was, above all else, to be a man, could hardly have been said to be my own. There was, of course, the sea beyond the dunes. It's fretting waves and shifting moods. But I will write no more of the first epoch of my

life beyond recording what hardly needs to be set down: it gave no hint of what I was to become. And yet I return to it often. I raise those memories more regularly as time removes them from me. There is a mystery in that. And likewise in the fact that I see my youth from the same distance and with the same clarity that I have seen it for some six decades. I see it, but I cannot touch it as I do more recent events. It belongs to another country. It is set apart, indelible, beyond my ink-stained reach, as if separated from me by an ocean too vast to cross, by some thousand miles of salty water. And I can only brush over the surfaces of experiences, not plumb their depths to understand their origins or discern their causes. I did this. I felt that. The reasons no more or less than what they seem. Everywhere, the outlines match the essence. And they are enough. I find in these days a place to rest among the wandering currents of memory, a refuge as changeless as the castle through which I romped, the question yet to come.

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I learned my letters in a crude hand, a little Latin alongside the alphabet, and less of the world beyond the castle and its grounds. I read haltingly, only when called upon, never of my own volition, and wished to be at play when I was at my studies, kicking my feet freely beneath the bench at which we sat for lessons, deaf to my tutor's rebukes, ready always to let fall my chalk, leave my dusty slate and dart away, down the staircase and through oak doors into the garden where we wove our fanciful stories, played our games with infant seriousness and bent to our own rules. I do not think this was a sign of exceptional wilfulness. I was stubborn of course—what boy is not?—and set upon my own ways, but I did not yet show the determination that would mark my later years, and mar all that I made by dint of it.

I lacked anything resembling discipline and I was fitted by little more than my love of imagined valour for the soldiering life. But I was a fourth son, who as of yet had showed no particular talent or distinction. Fourth, with less an obligation to uphold the family honour—that fell, of course, to Richard, and, in a smaller but not inconsequential degree, to James—than a responsibility not to betray it. Or so

With a well-made punk that has been kept assiduously dry, a good piece of flint, thumb sized, as I have said, and steel of whatever kind any man can easily make fire. There is all manner of nonsense that men tell each other. You must have this wood. If not it, then another. Birch is best. Maple better. Cedar inimitable. Or the reverse. The kind always varying according to the predilections of the speaker. Twigs. Dry grass for tinder. Leaves I was once told. Leaves! This from a Scottish fool who I called as much and sent on his way. Shredded bark more sensible but no more necessary. And of course, the infamous feather stick. Has there been a greater waste of effort than carving away in the cold when the fire could already be roaring, sending up great spurts of sparks as new fires do, and lighting up the night, releasing the first jets of fat from a roasting joint or melting pork lard in a pan nestled into the new formed coals in preparation for frying dough cakes? Do not listen. It is all the lunacy of self-appointed experts who would rather talk than do and have done on balance far more talking than doing. The wood matters not so long as it is dry. The tinder less. Branches burn as well as splinters chipped from logs, bark is good, but so is grass, reeds, moss, what have you, and leaves will teach you their hard lesson. It is essential only that all is dry and near at hand. That there are first small sticks and then larger logs in reach. Plenty of both if you can manage it. That is all. And it is easily gathered. I have done it myself in the dark, several times in the rain, though never in both, but I have had the learning of it for nigh on two score years. Make a substantial pile of the smaller sticks arranged however you will. Their disposition matters no more than the species of wood so long as there

my father impressed on me, beginning at an age when I understood his words but not their import, and continuing, in lectures he delivered to all of us boys over the dinners that began well but outlasted our appetites and became as they approached an end that was ever forestalled by another dish as interminable as our lessons. He continued like this until, a few weeks before my twelfth birthday, in a turn of events that was as predictable as it was delightful, he purchased me a commission, and I joined the 66th Regiment of Foot in Dublin as an ensign. I donned my as-of-yet diminutive red coat and my oversized cocked hat with a great deal of pride, but little understanding of why I wore the uniform or what it signified beyond a naïve certainty that I was now kitted out for valour.

In time, I learned, or at least found out enough to surmise, that my commission and my subsequent appointment to a post of relative ease a short day's walk from the castle in which I was raised was due to the good offices of Lady Temple, the wife of the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, a distant relative and a close acquaintance of my mother. Indeed, Lady Temple was to become the benefactor of my military career. I would be a sort of protégé to her and she a second mother to me. But that was yet far off. I knew no more of soldiering than I did of letters. I was a quicker study on the parade ground than at my childhood bench, but was too young to be much more than an onlooker, not a hanger on, nor an encumbrance, but at best an eager accessory to my senior officers.

There was drill, of course. The war with the American colonies was still raging, and we practiced our formations, our firing lines and fixed bayonet charges with a seriousness that was at once deadly and mock because, from the vantage of our Irish roost, real battle remained a distant and barely thinkable possibility, and, for all their novelty, these exercises seemed to me like a grownup extension of the childish pursuits that I had only just left behind.

are sufficient gaps through which a draft may pass should you need to fan your fire into life. Form a tinder ball of whatever you find that is fine and dry. Frayed bark. The fibers of wood. A ball of grass or moss or straw. Place it next to your punk. All is in readiness. Do not fret if it is a motley collection of combustibles. No matter that it is pleasing to the eye, or that it is satisfies the opinions of the tavern talkers, the abecedarians of the bush, the amateur pioneers who write their guides to settlement from the comfort of town, fires kindled with paper tapers or stoked from last nights coals roaring at their feet. Wood and tinder are meant for burning, not for looking. What looks poor like enough burns well. And what looks well often burns poorer than it looks. If making fire is an art—and it is, sharing its delicacy and nuance with works of old, divided withal into its own schools and masters—it is the art of making do, of foraging, of laying hands on what you can, and cobbling together substitutes for what you can't. I have found always that the bush provides what you need if you know to search for it, but rarely in the form you want or expect. You make fire alone, always and only with what you are given by your search, and the making of it will train you in expediency. If kindling flame is the craft of independence, it is likewise the craft of settlement in miniature, of roughing it with what you have, instead of regretting what you don't, the craft, indeed, of life itself, into which the best and worst of us are thrown haphazardly, consigned to our lots and circumstances, forced by the hand of fate to manage with our meagre inheritances, to fabricate our wholes from halves, from lesser fractions, from next to nothings, to make it do whatever it may be, and in contriving make ourselves. We are all together in the general scramble, all alike and subject to a singular law: a flame well tended will burn as brightly as one well begun, the smallest sparks, the tiniest, most fragile whisps of smoke, have set the greatest blazes, and roaring fires have died into ash for want of care. Look to your fires as to

I raced across the dusty parade ground with the same reckless enthusiasm with which I had recently charged across the lawn behind the castle. I thought myself very brave. But I must have looked a sight. No taller than a Brown Bess. And not yet able to fire one without being bowled over by the blast. My hat falling over my eyes as I ran no matter how hard I set it upon my head. The colours raised as far aloft as I could manage, which is to say neither very high nor particularly steady, wavering whenever I made an abortive reach for my hat. My face a show of fierceness when it was visible. I thank providence that I did not see combat, for I cannot imagine how I would have survived it by anything other than blind luck.

yourself. Tend both well and you will live in warmth and eat your fare until the fuel of life is gone and the flame burns down to ash.

When not seeing to their duties, which was most of the time, the officers took part in the social life of Dublin. There were balls and parties aplenty. Music in the castle. Rides. Outings to the beach. Manly wagers. And matters of honour. A whole menagerie of distractions through which streams of wine and spirits flowed freely, swelled more often than not to rivers, and were drunk down to the last drop. I was too young yet for strong drink and felt none of the compulsion for it that I do now. I was, indeed, too young to either take part in or to fully grasp the life that whirled so vibrantly around me. I knew something of it already, of course, but merely as an observer.

There had been hunts at Malahide, twice yearly balls for which the garden was adorned with lights, and a constant stream of visits. I had viewed the preparations for all these with fascination, and was sometimes presented to this relation or that gathering, but was then bundled off by the nurse, allowed at best to view the proceedings from between the balusters at the top of the staircase or surreptitiously from a similarly high window, opened enough to let in the sound of the music and with it something of the trembling frivolity of the proceedings, always watching from a distance, and always with fixed attention, but hardly understanding what passed before my eyes.

In my first posting, I tasted the pleasures I had until then viewed from afar. Tasted? Rather say sipped with the same hesitant delicacy with which I raised my first glass of claret to my lips. I understood more of what I saw and began to learn the allure and likewise the wiles of the fairer sex, but from the periphery of the gatherings, never as a participant. No matter that I was on occasion laughingly tugged into a dance by a lady, and acquitted myself well, as surprised at my own agility as the lady was surprised to be so surely lead. Was this the birth of the dandy I would soon become? No. I was but a boy. Sure footed, true, but childish all the same, able to see the forms of love and dalliance, their outward show, and reproduce the mannerisms of a rake, but not yet capable of penetrating to its heart or grasping it as anything more than another kind of play, as a role I might momentarily inhabit, but only momentarily, aware even as I danced that I was not yet formed to fully inhabit the part, that I would inevitably return to my infant self when the music stopped, as indeed I did.

All of this soon came to an end. The war with American colonies concluded in the defeat of the Paris Treaty and the ceding of all but our most northerly holdings on the continent. Three weeks later, the bitter taste of the news of our losses still fresh in my mouth and the mood of the men around me likewise despondent, the frivolities curtailed, the drink flowing as freely as always, but to salve sadness rather than stimulate joy, I was advanced to the rank of lieutenant, and then, on the very same day, the regiment was reduced and I was retired on half-pay. I cannot say that my head reeled with the suddenness of these changes anymore than when dancing nor that retirement did anything to dampen my pride at becoming a lieutenant at the tender age of twelve. I can say only that it happened and no more. That period of my life seems as like to a dream as any that I have lived. I can see the parade ground still. Picture the faces of my comrades. Feel the wavering weight of the colours that I raised and struggled to hold aloft. Taste

the richness of the claret on my lips. Hear the rustling softness of women's skirts. Everything is clear as day. Clearer than the brightest, cloudless afternoon. As if it is lit from within by its own light. None of it belonged to me then. Nor does it now. It passed as a dream, of its own accord, leaving but these lit and empty images in its wake, and, with its passing, woke me from my childhood into life.

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I returned briefly to Malahide. Its halls were no less grand, and I was not much taller than when I had left it a year ago, but I filled them out in a way that I had not. I no longer felt the wide-open space pressing on me with the censor of its ponderous silence, nor heard every footstep it returned to me as castigation of my unruliness, but stepped into it upon my arrival as if onto a stage on which I belonged by right of age and rank, not yet a man, but feeling myself on the verge of manhood, and thinking I should be respected accordingly. I was overweening. One might say brash. But what twelve-year-old retired lieutenant would not be?

To my surprise, my father did not so much indulge as encourage me in my pretensions, asking me to recount and then repeat my exploits over the dinners that had grown longer in my absence, but were now less an imposition against which I chaffed, than a languorous pleasure to which I felt myself entitled. I returned to my childhood games, but charging across the lawn in imitation of both my younger self and the soldier I had most recently been revealed the games for the frivolities they were, and my parade ground antics as another kind of show, more serious, but no less counterfeit than my boyish fancies.

I stood on the grass under the trees at its edge. The stick that had seconds ago been a sword daggled loosely from my hand. I felt my smallness. The smallness of what I had done in my short life. Of all that I might do. The stick fell from my suddenly weak fingers. I left it lying there in the shade and retired as quickly as my legs would

Rest the flint firmly on the punk or next to it, positioned so that the sparks will strike the center of the singed billet and it is stable in your hand. Hold the flint and bring the steel to it. Do not bring the flint and steel together, moving both as if you are beginning a round of applause. You are showering sparks, not praise, on the punk, and you will miss your mark. Nor should you strike the flint upon the steel. One seems like as to the other, but it is not. Striking flint with steel sends a shower of sparks into the punk. Striking steel with flint smothers what few sparks it brings forth. Take care with the steel. Swing it several times in practice before you strike in earnest. Strike true and clean. Do not flinch or hesitate. Do not let your flint hand slip or move. And exercise the greatest caution not in the darkness of the night, when fire is what you want and do not have and you must work by feel alone, for there is a kind of safety, a sort of circumspection, in blind fumbling, but in the evening, when shadows trick the sight and what seems true is not. I know this from sore experience and wear still a silver crescent on my knuckle where I cut it to the bone, the painful wages of my hastiness. A spark that falls on the punk will take and start it smouldering. When there are spots of ruby life in the charcoal, and a wavering of the air above it such as one sees at the edges of candle flames, place the ball of tinder square upon it, not so firmly as to smother it, but touching everywhere the surface whether it be ignited or not. It will catch at once. Let it burn, but not for long, and be sure to move it quickly to the wood. What is fast to catch is soon consumed. Use the bellows of your lungs to give it life and encourage it to grow: what a fire wants most is breath and you must breathe for it at first. Many a night in the bush did I exhausted myself in this task, sit panting and desolate before a coal that refused to become more. Desolate, I say. What else is it to be alone among the trees, wrung out by the day and these latest exertions, sensible all

the while of the night closing fast around you? Desolate I was, and worse, and yet each time I gathered myself, redoubled my efforts, as you must yours if you come to such a pass, and each time I was rewarded for my perseverance with a flicker, faint but indisputable. Feed the stuttering, infant flame, coax it with wood and exhalations until it strengthens, leaps up and dances red and laughing of its own accord, gives light and heat, and with them hope. Wherever there is fire, there is a hearth, no matter if it be the venerable withholding stones of Malahide blackened by centuries of blazes or the rude ground of the bush, swept cursorily clean with a branch, and wherever there is a hearth, wherever that consuming element takes root and grows its ruddy stalks, a man may find, and, in that finding, lose a home.

carry me to the comforting diversions of the castle.

And there were those aplenty. Whereas before, my father had banished me to my playroom, he now bade me join in the social life of Malahide. I danced at a ball on the same lawn across which I had raced, and acquitted myself as well as I had when I was an ensign. I fancied that I turned a few hearts, but I can see now that what I mistook for true affection was a laughing indulgence, which is, in its way and from the vantage of an old man, more touching by far. Had I seen it then, it would have scalded me with indignation. But I had been held only briefly on the margin of the grass, and remained blithe in all things.

I liked the hunts best, and road next to my father, hurtling hedgerows on a steed I hardly needed to urge forward. In these moments, I felt myself not so much a man, riding proud among men, but a hound, so bent was I upon the chase, seeing always not what was before me, but reaching out with every bound of the lathered horse towards the fatal triumph, living as the horns called out around me for what was yet to come, and finding in the fox brought to bay and killed only the dull and leaden end of that glorious, intemperate projection of myself. I took no joy in the end. I have never loved death as some men do, though I have dealt it as needs must. But there was in that milling, winded stop, in the hounds spent and lolling, in the horses heaving out their breaths and the men resting sated in their saddles, a febrile trembling of the spirit, a sort of pain, which I can recall, but not explain, and which I came to long for as much as the chase, and to resent as much as I longed for it.

None of this was to last. After a mere handful of months, my father determined that I should complete the schooling I could hardly have been said to have begun, and preparations were made to send me to the Manchester Free Public School.

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My second departure from Malahide made little impression on me. My first voyage by sea was likewise uneventful, and I cannot say that setting foot on land that had been briefly the home of my ancestors but was a discovery to me, walking down the gangplank onto the solid pier reaching out from the country of my heart, the great Britannia, after the rocking crossing was anything but unremarkable and prefigured nothing.

The school was as it is. It has been described by others with more fluent but less effectual pens than my own and I will not dwell at length on my years there. The masters were as they always are in such places, good and bad according to their wont, the worst often revealing themselves in time to be the best, and those who remained always the worst to be suffered, resented and surpassed.

The boys were rough, as boys are meant to be. I arrived with what seemed an overblown sense of myself, a commissioned officer in bearing, if no longer in fact, and was not proven as wrong as perhaps I should have been. I bloodied several noses, and had mine bloodied in turn, but nevertheless got the better of that contest. I believe to this day that it is not the size of the

boy or man that determines the outcome of a contest, but the force of his will, and mine was iron alloyed into steel by the refusal to cede. In surrender lay the trembling smallness that had come over me at the edge of the lawn. I could not yet name it. I could hardly bring myself to remember it let alone plumb its depths and seek its origins. In truth, I did not yet know it, for it would grow like me into something greater by far than what it was when I first glimpsed it, becoming more expansive, stranger and more consuming with every passing year. A shadow which would in time swallow my life.

I had hardly limned it, but I loathed it. And yet I courted it with the same determination that I hurled myself towards the dull ends of hunts, challenging whoever crossed me, no matter if they were taller or stronger, and they often were, testing not the strength of my arms, but my relentlessness, the forcefulness with which I could reject what I had seen myself to be, drawing my stubbornness out of me in great eruptions of will, and never once exhausting it. I gained in this way a reputation that made me something of a leader. Not the head boy of the school—no, I have never had it in me to ascend to such a height, even among boys—but, as suited my rank, a sort of lieutenant, able to gather a circle of like minded school mates around me, never large, but loyal and tightly knit, a talent that has stayed with me to this day, and which I credit for the stream of visitors, some come to inspect me as a curiosity, to gather up an anecdote for their English dinning table, a character sketch sufficient for a handful of pages of their travels, but many as friends, a procession which has slowed in recent years but never entirely ceased to carry the world to the door of my cabin above the lake.

I acquired along with this a serviceable hand, no longer crude, but idiosyncratic, neither pleasing to the masters nor to myself, suited most of all to keeping pace with my racing thoughts, slanting sharply to the right, as if leaning always towards the next word, the next sentence, the idea to come, but showing no sign yet of what it was to become. I wrote little. I wrote only when compelled. And I wrote rapidly so as to free myself of the irksome task which had been imposed upon me, never suspecting the purposes to which I would, in the time towards which my letters pointed, put this rude script nor the rapidity with which I became accustomed to scratching out.

I learned as well to bluff my way through Latin, but never Greek, and as much of maths and natural science as I would ever know, more indeed than I needed, and most of which I promptly forgot as soon as I had offered proof that I understood it. What I know I have gleaned from the world by watching and doing, listening to those who knew better or differently than I did, and assaying their methods, testing them myself in the laboratory of the bush, and making them my own. Always I have preferred to discover by acting. Little have I studied by other means. I was as loath then as I am now, as I have always been, to submit myself to the words of other men, to become a subject of their discourse, and chafe still like a wilful child on a school room bench against the chains of sentences I have not written.

Four years I spent in Manchester, returning on occasion to Malahide, but never staying long enough to stop remarking on the transformations in my family's features and settle into my place among society. The castle became the home I had known and now remembered with a fondness that marked my remove from it. So it is that boys progress towards manhood: they find themselves strangers in the haunts of youth before they have found themselves men in the world. And I was no different. There is in retrospect a poignant sweetness to this loss, but it is not felt at the time as anything but a glad process full of transformation and hope. I cannot say that I was ever less than happy, and when my sojourn at public school came to an end, whatever sadness I might have had at my departure was erased by the excitement of resuming my commission with the prospect of a long and heroic career before me.

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I have written that those years were never less than happy. It is true. There is no one to deceive but myself and I have neither the desire nor the purity of arrogance to deny what I was, least of all what am and have made of my life.

At public school, I achieved with ease all that I wished or learned with similar ease to wish for what I could achieve. And yet I am compelled, at this late hour of my life, not to revise the statement, nor to strike it out, but to add an addendum of sorts, to append a qualification in retrospect, not to restate the question, which had not yet arrived and to which, in any case, there would be no reply, not from those days when worries were fleeting and life gave me what I asked of it, nor discover it implicit in what I then knew, not to find in it an offing, as of the April storms that come from the west and crash with Olympian thunder down on my roof, but that are first a transformation of the day that is felt indelibly by all who are attuned to the vicissitudes of the weather in this long peninsula between the lakes, that is felt but which does not take the form of a definitive sign towards which one can point and say, see, there will thunder by noon and a downpour shortly after, not to unearth even the most nebulous indication of what was to come, but to add a caveat to my contentment: I lived, like all young men, within the limits of my ignorance.

I was not constrained, but I was blind, blind to what lay ahead of me, and blind likewise to the true scope of existence, to its lofty heights and loathsome depths, to how a man might rise and just as easily fall, and my happiness was not true happiness. Nor is it right to call it contentment, happiness' paler shadow, despite having written just that. It was smaller by far, though it was not the excoriating smallness I felt on the lawn. Even that, as terrible as it had been, was compassed by the narrow bounds of my experience. What I gauged myself against in that moment in the shade was a boy's conception of accomplishment. I found myself wanting with a measure that was itself wanting, for I had no sense of the borders which so thoroughly enclosed both my life and my sentiments, nor of the unfathomable world that lay beyond them.

The question that haunts me had not yet arrived, but other, lesser questions, gather around those years: What is happiness that knows not what it is nor what it might become? What is happiness without a comparable loss? Without an equal measure of sorrow? What is it for what you know to be the sum of knowledge? To exist secure within the round of a certainty that contains even the doubt that troubles it? To touch nothing you cannot explain? And to think there is nothing beyond what you can? To never imagine let alone limn the vertiginous sublimity of greatness? The all-consuming emptiness at the heart of eminence? I was writing out my life on a single leaf, not thinking of the book into which it was stitched, the companion volumes next to it on the shelf, the library of shelves, volumes upon volumes, shelves upon shelves, words beyond number, the speaking words whose contours are sharpened by lantern light, outlined by the fingers that trace them, that are tasted on the lips that repeat them, the silent words, waiting ghostly in books that gather dust, words set down by men but beyond their count, so many words poured from so many busy pens, so many poured from mine.

I am tired. The thought of writing more tonight exhausts me. Let the lesser questions rest. The greater one remains. The fire is low. My hand lags, trembles. My script stutters. The letters wander among the thickets of the past, stray into the feebleness of age, into a rare uncertainty, and turn ragged and uneven with regret. I will go no further. The bottle is drunk. How many after it? The dregs dry in the glass. The night draws on to morning. Enough for now: Arthur awaits me tomorrow.