

Certain Amazing Adventures of Mr. Hoel

You have asked for a tale, and I shall fall into it.
—Lars Hoel

Well, what do you expect with a name like that? Call him Lars, call him Claes, call him Cowerie, Pure Act, Oecumene, or Segundo Punt. Or Mignon the vinegar-swill. He don't mind. Hoel knows what's his.

Now let me draw you back to Hoel's naissance in the city with the second tallest spires and the vast majority of cows. Let us meander along the rutted byways of his colonial youth, and, at length—the salt scent bursting in wafts more pronounced—out onto the cornice where no matter how implacable the drubbing blows of Brother Sun, Hoel could always ride his bicycle a meter in from the seawall, for it was there that the breakers delivered up their tenderest after-orgasms of cooling foam. Then lean the cycle in the shaded L where tower and wall abut and up the spiral steps of the citadel, proof too from sun-fire by virtue of its inconceivable thickness, and peer through the topmost slit, out over the star defenses, beyond the breakers with their toppled columns rolling nowhere but to and fro, and parts of ships and men dashed everywhere among them. From such a vantage it was obvious that only a drunk and half-daft *boucanier* would dream of invading: Drake had tried, Houghton too, Knox and Aleworthy, Coylewright and Fullalove had tried, Zerosum, Gameknee, Briscoe, Polhemus More and Negroshell, and every man jack of them had done his best-worst to take this place, and look where that got 'em.

Now if a sentence ever cried out for a period, that one did—full stop. But shall we rest content to dispatch it swiftly and move on? Not us. Against all reason, we seize this wounded heap of phonemes and elevate it on the battlefield, because that is what young Hoel would do: leap forward under fire—his knowledge of plumbing comes later, and he will not discover the meaning of the term “closed nipple” for many a page or perhaps many-many a page depending on the type font and how it's spaced and leaded, and the width of the margins and depth of the columns, and just to give some indication of the ambitious life we share with Master Hoel, we return to . . . *and look where that got 'em*, embrace it, plant kisses on both its cheeks and pin an exclamation point—!—upon its bloodied breast, which, no matter how we try, falls thirteen words wide of the mark, but no matter—we are only in the third paragraph and already have tasted victory. Now we may go forward—for if we would live, we have aught else to do.

Of Plumbing

Now ye waterways of the world be nothing more than plumbing, see? The seas, ye great sumps. Ye storms, ye tides and currents: pumps. And ye rivers, however brisk at the headwaters or broad about the mouth, no more than gutters to shunt ye flow from mountainpeak to basin. Remember that, young Hoel, as from the tower you behold your bicycle self from afar, pedaling back the way you came, a meter from the seawall, bathing your feverish brain in cooling spray when suddenly, slurp! a wavelick curls its tongue over the parapet and laps you up. That's how it works: to get somewhere, you have to depart, and your bicycle knows this, for it pedals on *sans* you, Master Hoel, a-grieving as it cranks, yet reconciled to ye parting.

So, what befalls the cunning lad still ensconced within the tower? Does he turn a rigid oblong, shoulder himself a billet, and mortar in among his brethren stones? Well perhaps in another telling. But in this tale Hoel's by nature most compressible and resilient, like a mouse or a bat, and can squeeze through the turret's slit and the currents will buoy him beyond the pounding surf where the tumbled columns roll, their capitals too, serving as rough harbors for the broken-up ships and parts of men, flayed to gristle by scallop shells, yet plucked at by tenacious crabs. Seek all you like, high-flying Master H., you will not find your bicycle self amidst the flotsam tossing there. For the sunken world has claimed him to wander as a sea mountaineer: deep he's gone and you shall see him no more—he rises on judgment day and not an instant before, while you—you travel with the atmosphere, high enough to spy a topgallant playing cat and mouse with the horizon—you know by inborn will how to swoop down to ride upon the narwhale that follows the fleet—the fleet that hugs the outer banks—the fleet that would never dream of invading unless the officers and men were a drunk and desperate lot and see what happens then. Closer now. Close enough to make her name: *Perseverance*, a first class merchantman out of—by Jove—there's a sterncastle for you—glazed and rearing high as cathedral wall! She trails a hawser, so grasp it, Master Hoel, twist off ye narwhale's horn—a gift of the sea—jam it into your belt for later use. Now shinny up—mind the rudder doesn't konk you—she's bearing northeast now, for the Azores?—and shinny, swing and shinny—there's a casement gaping, best make for that one. Swing, Master Pendulum, what other chance have you?—not a narwhale left to the horizon, we've struck into shark country now. Ah, another tack to starboard—she's bearing east again, offering canvas to the wind—it's now or never, swing you feet first and in—no time to peekaboo, Master Hoel, only point your toes and fenestrate! Momentum, surface, touchdown—slide. Swoosh of charts swept to the boards and jet ink plashing on ye two-hundred knot Isfahan, now tuck and roll laddy H.—whump! there's a bedpost for you—one of four—and compassed by them, the Captain's wife, torpid and tugging at the counterpane now that the wind has shifted and blown such a boy as you in through her casement. Off with your boots. Gone chemise and breeches. Slip in. She's jackknifing, burrowing into your warmth and reaching round her hip you say hi! what bulges here—some South Sea bubble? Nay, young Hoel, it's three months with the Captain's child she is. But will you let so mild a rising stand before the course of things? And will you *pense* through the consequences even once, or must we think for you, precocious one? At any moment, Sir Captain Goosey

may tromp belowdecks and then you'd meet with sharper mouths than narwhales, and the rest of your adventure would be rank digestion, nothing more.

But I'll tell you this, you've timed your coming well, for his Captainship is occupied upon the poop with nothing less than facing down a mutiny—no coward he, and by far the most to lose—so you've got your moment. Posh. There's a larboard tack. Adventure the first, in a ripe and willing world, so bung Hoel! But something's slack. Ah, Hoel, you're still too much the laddy for such mannish play. All framed out hull and timbers, but not yet rigged to ply the sea. Fear not, Hoel, here's your spiral horn. Fit it thus and slip it so: ride current in the dips, spread yardage when she rises—lee and blow, swell and vortex, and upon my honour here comes the crest—nose up! And there's the art of navigation learned; again.

Chapter Two

In which Master Hoel diverges, never to meet again. Which was treated of in Chapter One, so we'd better catch up or else be left behind in the great rush of being.

Noo, 'tis nae every Da that can square the birth of his son with the arrival—a mere three-month later—of an afterbirth consisting of living twins—and one of each order, no less. Well, *turn them out the bastards!* the Captain did, tears of wife or no, on the next frigate bound for the 'mericas where they manifest as North and South Carolina and bicker to this day as proper siblings should and if you believe that, you'll believe anything. Not to your liking, this turn of events? Well, it don't much please me neither.

Yet it's a prior question whether the Captain lived to do this deed at all. Who's for? Against? Well, from the look of it we've no clear majority. In a dead heat like this, there's nothing to do but venture back aboard ship and rejoin young Hoel, debunged, debunked, and now sequestered beneath the cozy billet while Captain Goosey tromps round the cabin speaking a load of French, stoops to pick his charts and inkwell up off the floor—not noticing, phew! young Hoel's nose a-poking out between the ruffles. Capt. sits, glares at the middle distance, knocks back a snort. Fiddles with his instruments, quill scratches nautical math, blows off a load more French then stomps abovedecks again, pop! straight into ball aimed at a booby bird that perched upon the hatch cover and advantageously flew off, leaving the deckhands to swab up and furnishing a pretext for a first-rate duplex burial at sea: the Captain and the bootless knave what nailed 'im—for accident or nay, when it comes to such a tort, well what's a yardarm for? A muttered litany, a broadside homage, flowers for the widow—well, no flowers to speak of in the tractless sargasso, so a platter of salt fluke with spuds scalloped like aspidistras—and up from under the billet comes young Hoel, stretching, breathing in with the morning air how easy it is to scuttle a Captain—yet still not perceiving his true relationship to things and unaware that give or take an instant, and one booby bird more or less, we might be bobbing in the wake of two orphan Carolinas and rowing across an entirely different tale.

Now we haven't said a word about young Hoel's progenitors, and this is hardly the time or place, but we can imagine how the tender stowaway occupied himself for the duration of the passage: playing bung-in-the-ocean with Mme. Captain—the

narwhale horn fitted like a second skin that time and experience sloughs off—between bouts of squeezing evermore tightly beneath the bed whenever the First Mate had a mind to tromp belowdecks, rustle the charts, mutter in French and take advantage in a most dastardly way of Mme.'s nearsighted supposition that the manifest weight pressing in upon her was none other than her ghostly husband come a-visiting from beyond. Young Hoel felt outrage, yes, but what could he do? Being only a laddy, summoned up afterward from beneath the counterpane, sought out by upside-down eyes brimming with nearsighted fondness, focusing on, yet past him as nearsighted eyes are wont to do, upside-down cheeks heightened all the more auspiciously by a light girlish poxing—her hair, wavy from so long at sea, curtaining down to sweep the floorplanks—those irises, a deepjade green, rimmed in blue pearly in star salients to neargray, upside-down mouth parting for her too-big tongue, upside-down breath intoning “come up Lars, my beauty, for the Captain has gone abovedecks to lash himself to the wheel for a watch.”

And this was more or less how the voyage progressed, herself growing greater with treble load, until at length the First Mate desisted in his efforts, the anticline proving just too steep for grappling, if you catch my meaning, while young Hoel—knowing aught else but the back road to El Dorado—found this no great thing to overcome, and in any case, his limbs grew everyday more sinew'd and capable, and he an enduring seaman withal.

A good thing too that the culverins boomed when they did, meaning land ho, and up the river past the source of all longitude, for Hoel too was expanding, and so promiscuously that in a week they'd never have been able to pull off this merry trick—rehearsed between the ever less frequent stompings down of the First Mate—namely secreting Master burgeoning Hoel beneath her yards of petticoat and descending the gangplank ensemble, Hoel mincing crouched, half-wedged betwixt her thighs, Hoel's skirt-draped crown protruding as a kind of netherbelly.

My child, you carry so low and bumpily 'tis sure you'll drop a litter! quoth the Queen as Mme. C. made her curtsy—ouch, Hoel, bend your knees!—for now it comes out that this is no everyday disembarkation, not with the Regina herself enthroned upon the quay amidst standards and banners and the better part of Court, Council, and Parliament—those not swinging from the gibbet—and all for the purpose of loading the Captain's widow down with titles and honorifics—most particularly title to Badidabadeye, its vasty lands and holdings, and this only on account of her late husband—plugged for a booby on the wide, unrelenting sea—having rowed and portaged a score of pestilential leagues upstream from the disembovement of El Rio Echt to discover a mine so deeply posh with all things gay, gaudy, and jinglesome in the pocket that the very rumor of it, much less its actuality, launched a merchant navec, a flotilla of sharp-toothed frigates and an extortion industry—and this was only chanticleer's crow at the dawning, before even he learned to peck sugar from the palm of the Barbadoes.

“Go now, sweet Lars,” she whispered, “and make your fortune as you may, for I can harbour you no longer as a child. But come back to me as a man.” And all unnoticed

in the ceremony, Hoel struck out from beneath her petticoats and sifted in among the crowd where her misty, nearsighted eyes could not reach him, and her coach and twelve clattered away down the winding streets of ?

“Lord love a duck!” hard by his ear. “An ’arf-grown Bedoon by the look of ’im. Well, we’re all God’s elephants an’ carstles.” Then more pointed still, “Hallo, Son o’ the Prophet—pssst! Omar, listen ’ere.”

Tick-tick. Tick-tick.

“She ’asn’t a tock to ’er name, such a box o’ scotch she is. Precision, boyo, precision—’elvetica craft to the core or I’m not Jim the Pimp (and I am, I am—in ’arts, clubs, diamonds, and spades.) Now this little fob is the pride and joy of ’is lordship the Archbishop of ’abidababida—’oo must needs liquefy ’is assets on account of an embarrassment I’m sworn on me honor not to breave a word of. Five bob is all ’e’s arsking—candy from a baby at twice the price.” A beat. “Ow, it’s an ’ard man you are Ali Baba—no mercy for a poor clergyman wots worn down to ’is uppers. Well three bob then an’ tick-tick! Off down Godolphin Street she goes.” Then hearing still nothing whispers, “’Ere now, it’d be a crime to see filthy lucre come between the likes of us—let’s ’ave two and six—and your right ’and in bruver’ood. Tyke it or leave it, for as that’s as deep a cut as ’is Grace’s pride will bear.”

Hoel his vacant pockets outturns. Proffers flat his palms.

“Ah so that’s ’ow it stands—it’s ’arts of oak our little Pasha is. Well, no matter, son, I’ve fallen off the camel mor’n’ once me’self ’an ’opped right back on ’im again. Bruised me bum, but kept me pride fru it all. And Fortuna, God bless ’er, never failed to bring me round again. Say, Khaled! D’ye ’ear that? Them’s Bells of Beau tolling down the curtain on another ’ard day’s labor. Time to pull up stakes and ’ed for me Gates o’ Rome. It’s been a chest o’ treasure palavering wif you lad, truly it ’as.” Pumps Hoel’s hand, makes to leave—turns back. “Say, Mohammed, you look a bit of the ’oly grail, if you don’t mind me saying so. See ’ere, Chateau Le Pimp is just down the wiggleround. Come on along—me trouble and strife’ll sit you down to an ’arry Tate o’ the best bubble and squeak as ever passed your ’ampstead ’eath on ’is way down Uncle George. An’ arfter, we’ll slip round to the Lemon and Leak—oh blimey, I do blaspheme, forgetting as ’ow the Prophet forbids you blokes a scour-the-sink. Well, no matter. What say, Saladin? Friends for life? Well then, andiamo!”

Boom! There goes the tower, the Queen, the Court and whatever heads of Parliament aren’t topping the palings. See how easy it is, truly? Then war and plunder, expropriation and other founding principles. Mme. Captain Earl and Gentledutchess survives by shearing off her wavy locks, hocking her last sheep for spectacles through which to squint and aim an arquebus, strapping on the creaky baronial breastplate, greaves, and plum’d helm that for two centuries stood cobwebbed in the hallway and charging off to slaughter at a host of battles named after bridges ending in . . . *bourne*. It flares it does—the civil strife—it wanes to a fingernail and waxes gibbous, it ravages the countryside, while back in Londinium Towne, life’s as milky as a well-suckled ewe and young Hoel is topping-out, broadening in the rafters and V’ing down handsomely

to a fencer's stance, or so one would suppose watching him in combat with the fire's shadows, just don't get cocky in the Lemon and Leak or you'll end up skewered for a poet and then we'd have two lines of obit and fuckall else to tell.

Thus life progresses, right fine under Jim's (thatched) roof in company with Missus Pimp and Nellie—a comely lass, but lame, lame—and guttersfull of tannic acid sluicing by the doorstep, seeking samadhi in the eternal Thames while every morning gasp! Hoel's feet have poked an inch or three further down the billet.

“Just look at 'im Mrs. Jim—'e's growing like a weed!” Then *sotto voce*: “Now Lars, I've come to love y'like me own son—and you've fine 'ands for the trade—but the day'll come when you're sure to lay 'em on me darling bricks n' mortar. And then I'll 'ave ye by yer deck the halls, I will—for Nellie, she's me pride and joy. Oh it's no fault of yours, Lars, but show me the Son of Adam 'oo's proof against the sighs and blandishments of an errant rib!” Then *forte*: “Lars! Lars, my bucko! It's up and at 'em. Quick, rouse yourself lad, and 'abilate, for we're off to Splungeon's Company. 'E'll be your new master, Splungeon will, it's all arranged, and you the better for it. Never let it be said that old Jim led you down Five Finger Alley, leading like as not to Tyburn and a hempen end. No, Lars, you was born for finer things—ah, Splungeon—speak of the Devil, we was just—shake hands, lad, and mind—you stand in the presence of perishing genius. Now Splungeon, this 'ere's Master 'oel, and as willing a 'prentice as ever I've taught. But now it's time for 'im to save 'is neck—er, learn the arts of Thespis—ain't it boy? So use 'im well and 'e'll reward you double measure. 'E's gifted wif a keen eye and a quick ear. And you've a flair for swordplay, ain't ye Lars?”

Guano. Hoel dreams guano land. Is that where he's from or where he's bound? And waking, he misses Jim the Pimp and the traffic in silk handkerchiefs roundabout the carriages, horseflops, and throngs of Covent G., and he broods on whatever could have made his master think he'd designs on poor Nellie, pretty as she was with her great amber eyes and crippled foot—hop scrape, hop scrape. Thus the first true bitter pill in young Hoel's life—for he knows he'd never betray Jim's trust, but hasn't the tongue to tell him, nor knowledge of how he got that way—how he became the man of principle he is—and in any event his heart's plighted to Lady Badidabadeye who, back from the wars of restitution, retired her suit of armor to the drafty hall, and her specs to the uppermost highboy drawer, and but for the graze of a fowling ball above her left and most luminescently myopic eye remains entirely as he'd remember her, and apart from certain accommodations to the way things are, viz.: the raw necessity of liaisoning with one Meyer Begman, cloth merchant and now Earl of Bobbin, she and her brood are doing fine.

Now the Captain's son is off to be Harrowed, while the bastard twins in whose lives young Hoel invested so seminally have been shipped off to the Aunt Tillies. No, that's too brutal for even our manufactured Albion, so we shall leave them romping on the manicured lawns of Badidabadeye, puzzling out the mazes and playing Sikh and Sepoy among the topiary while their Papa—who knows none of this—perfects his

craft of sword and buckler upon the planks of the Lavender Lane and rapidly grows too Lysander-like for maiden roles and Splungeon is a kindly master, but by G*d's wounds his plays are bad!

Then one crisp evening from the wings, Hoel spots Jim's face among the groundlings, and beside him little Nellie too, and they shout and wave and Nellie's eyes light up when he runs through Al-Faisal, who, played by none less than Dalrymple himself, staggers back authentically, rapier clasped beneath armpit, yowling "Oy, infidel, you've done me!" and the curtain rings down and when it rises, they're gone. Gone too the theater and half London more or less, for in those days they built great cities out of kindling, and now it's on to the next whiskey bar.

Away, away from the smoldering city, with aught but a bundle o' nothing knotted to your shouldered staff. Could they all, every one, Jim and his good wif, and little Nellie hop-scape, Splungeon, Dalrymple, and the whole Duke's company of Lavender Men—could they all have perished behind the curtaining flame? Such thoughts overtook him mile upon mile, so that Hoel scarcely saw the country he passed through on his northward march—its ochre then red stone outcrops, its cows then sheep, then men—dark cloaked and suddenly six of 'em—and not a one without a kerchief mask and arrayed to pinch off all avenues of escape, and this for the sole purpose of alerting travelers, and Hoel in particular, to the fact that their belongings, meager or otherwise, must now change hands definitive-wise. This message they communicated also by means of their pistols—not waved aimlessly about, but pointed with all the practiced intention so fundamentally bollixed-up a gang could muster. And reinforced by an unambiguous "Quick now—give over!"—this uttered by a fearsome one-eye planted foursquare in his path, and immediately cognated as none other than "Sir" Humphrey Kinesthesia—the scourge of Shropshire himself. *Funny*, thought Hoel, *I could've sworn we were in Tuscany.*

Now a smooth handover of his meager goods would have cost Hoel nothing but his pride. But even a bundle of meager can make a useful buckler, and did I forget to mention that Hoel—though he had never drawn in anger before—was no mean academician of the sword? Soon then, there were more than one eyepatch among them, for Pinchback, Vidalia, Thebes, Ottavio, and Terzerima felt all five the sabre's lick—alarm'd humours springing into liquid effusion: purging toxins, oozing lymph and titrating humours in the general endeavor of suturing and keloids—while "Sir" Humphrey alone found the vital in him pooling, and before too long, he who had the most to lose lost all and was on his way to somewhere—reward or no I cannot say—and yet six remained, for now young Hoel found himself Captain of a highway company and soon to be a wanted man.

There is a particular hour of a particular day when fear lightens. What once was total lightens into particulars.

At such a time as this, as Hoel stands ready to embark on an adult and seemingly

criminal life, it is tempting to administer a round of expository inoculations as proof against latent afflictions of the body narrative. But how to treat for the unknown?

Is this country really England? What epoch are we in, more or less? Did Hoel ever leave his sunstroked citadel at all, or is he still staring out at the sea, dreaming? In old age will he resort to pushing a walker? Accept, lamb-like, the ministrations of his care-givers, or revel in the fevered luxury of warlike resistance? Will he languish in his dotage, or bite the cyanide, and make his escape? And how are his children faring?

Now if I am right about this, these questions are more vexing to me than to you. If they piqued you inordinately, you doubtless wouldn't have got this far. And if I really didn't feel equal to the task, I'd have left Hoel as I found him—an imminent, unhatched thing, frying by degrees on the shore of his native land, never to breathe free, or for that matter breathe at all.

“Sir” Humphrey Kinesthesia’s last words: “Never forget, my boy, people are a stupid lot—but it works for some.”

“Sir” Humphrey stopped just short of saying, “Never forget, my son,” since that would have raised enormous problems in the plot, not least the question of parricide, which, for the moment, is best swept under the rug. So go, Hoel unfettered! Avanti—to the point where, after scores of stands and deliveries, myriad turnings over of goods in exchange for a ticket to one more round of passing air, after all the main effort of dividing the loot and carving a warren of caves in the red sandstone cliffs to repair to by moonlight, not to mention fencing the boodle to Lord Begman’s bagmen for a fraction of its worth, the cycle begins anew with a stamp of hooves, a whinny of rearing-up charger, the shuddering halt of yet another carriage from which a bewigged, bediademed head pokes out bewildered, brain pickled in contempt and conjuring a torrent of insult to heap upon the damn fool coachman for stopping dead in the middle of nowhere, lips curling in half-snarl, then jaw falling agape at the realization that the bright, appraising eye sighting down the barrel of the flintlock steadied upon one frill-cuffed forearm belongs to none other than the present iteration of “Sir” Humphrey K.—the scourge of Shropshire himself—who, breaking ranks with his predecessors, now proceeds to kill. And not in self-defense, mind you, but purely because (I think) the old bird made Hoel nervous fumbling in her muff like that for what might have been a derringer, but turned out not to be, and that’s called getting hanged *and* quartered if ever they catch you, Hoel, and how could you have done it? Bored a sap through the smooth and powdered brow of a dame old enough to be your grandma, and who indeed could be your grandma since we know nothing of your lineage—how could you do it, Hoel? As if you knew! As if you could tell us.

Was it something in those eyes, in the very unlinedness of her powdered forehead that *required*—the way the wattles of certain chicken-like throats seem to demand our grasp—no, that’s too much—let’s say Hoel did it out of fear. Yet he’d had more than one derringer pulled on him, and every time shot it out of the too-clever-by-half hand that held it—no, Hoel would never go so far as to say he aimed for her hand and missed, and all unintended sent up a geyser of dust upon that inoffensive and gentle

brow. No, let's give Hoel due intent. Surely if he were to make a confession of his motives, that would prove a welcome thing, would it not? But here Hoel stands mute, whether of malice or by act of G*d, I cannot say.

One thing's sure, this writing of a deep third eye upon the Baroness's brow served straightaway to part him from the confraternity of honest thieves, since Pinchback, Vidalia, Thebes, Ottavio, and Terzerima—not one of whom would stick at bugging a goat—were hardly the sort of fellows to put up with murder *sungfroid*. And then, truth to tell, in that moment, Hoel really couldn't give them any better account than he just gave us, so knowing only that he'd become a stranger to himself and men, duly took his banishment in stride upon stride along the highroad, with nothing but a few thousand silver crowns sewn in his lining to keep their merry jingling in check. Empire, Hoel, empire! You're made for more than simple robbery.

Chapter 5

Wherein Science Accomplishes a Pig That Shits Gold

Nor would it do for our Hoel to turn framebreaker on the Pudding Moors, or bear passive witness to the coming of steam, with its great iron horse that rode not upon rails, but stamped up and down, blowing rivets from Hove to the Hebrides without ever managing to go anywhere at all. Does Hoel remember the Captain's wife, or is his slate wiped clean and writ o'er—and did she tell him 'ere they parted that he was to be a da twice over in one? Did she know to tell him? And what of his narwhale horn—the gift of the sea? Does Hoel wear it still as a charm against injury, or did he make her a present of it—slipt between garter and thigh when beneath her skirts he waited to be born anew upon the groaning docks of the Merchants Companie? Does she unlock, now and again, the lid of her sea-coffer—unleashing, almost with a hiss, a salted atmosphere, a slap of sail, an intestinal tug of rigging? Does she pluck the ivory prong from its velvet sheath, and place't within the cupped palms of first one and then the other wide-eyed twin? Does she speak: “This is a token of your father, Hoel, whom I oncet knew at sea”? And do their eyes alight, and up they pipe in turn: “T'was Papa's? Oh, how slight it weighs!” And yet, “How hard and dry!”

Ever lighter, harder, drier, swifter! Soon they'll get it right and bolt that iron boiler to a rail-bound carriage. Does Hoel-in-hiding imagine his children riding on't? Are they brought up side-by-side with ha'brother Malcolm, the Captain's lawful heir? Has Lord Bagman—having run up a tidy little bull on first reports of Waterloo—anted up for their education, or are they still romping in the topiary like wild kittens? Neither! They're run away from home just like their da did—and ah! how their dear mother's nearsighted yet heartstoppingly limpid eyes brimmed over when the retainers, sent out to comb every ride, cleft, copse, and hummock of Badidabadeye, returned at day's end without having sighted a hair to prove they ever lived at all.

Gone off adventuring with Captain Swing they have—wreaking havoc by dark of moon, while Malcolm-to-the-manor-born learns the art of suffocating birds to the furtherance of Science. Such a thing! Such a thing to teach and learn—preparatory

as it is to future rough encounters in the latitudes where Albion's sun don't blink for fear of losing all, where birds cannae fly, yet the tse-tses grow as long as a bushman's forearm, and the king's fastest runner may yet outpace the dot-dash man. But who cares a fig for Malcolm's fate when Hoel's sweet progeny have been run to earth by the Yeoman guard, tried for traitors and sentenced to indenture in the plantations of Virginia Detenta, or else transported to the land of paddymelons for to shear sheep evermore, mate inauspiciously and found a race of imbeciles—which, in fact, one can do anywhere.

Can it be, O can it be that this is what becomes of sister Olive and brother Clive?

What Hoel is not: Clever with languages; dexterous with his fingers. Musical. Moral in the least respect. Well, some question about that last—it's just that Hoel don't buy his virtues on margin like some we know. Yet he fences so artfully, it's an honor to be cut by him. And a dead-eye shot. Still, what made him pop that old buzzard what 'ad nuffin' in 'er muff but fingers? Hard to reach him in the pale he's gone and put himself beyond. Well then, what say he didn't do it. What happens then? Ah, simplicity! He's gone to France (and Nellie).

Chapter on Influenza

In the exhibition hall, men of all classes—Hoel among them—stand mutely before the machines: machines as indifferent to the caps of the workers as to the toppers of the densely woven bourgeoisie. If the machines are intent upon anything, it is not stopping to blink in deference to the white of ancient sunlight made new in the cast-iron eye of the vitreous world.

Gulp goes Hoel, sweating in his coat made from highway robbery. Time to set this coat in motion. Time to roll the golden guineas. Hoel is drawn to the wire pulling machine, and to the machine just beside it, the one that braids cable from wire. Zoom. Aaaaah. There goes the bridge, traversing itself beyond the sectional. Awesome in its legitimacy. And one part of Hoel goes with it, cantilevers beyond the sectional and bridges into the awe-chasm.

But there's yet another part of Hoel and another France in which he's taking root, burrowing tendrils that began as toes into the black and fizzing soil. Yes, there's more of him, and this incarnation is warmed by the dark, draws nutrients from the granularity of his inky hothouse; swells, bulges, obtrudes, pops full-blown out of previous incomplections—achieves perfection in form, then waits. He's ripe. He's ready. On the cusp of rotting. When they dig him up, he's not a pretty sight. But a truffle is a truffle, and no one's buying Hoel for his looks. And this Hoel, too, has ventured beyond singularity—has become the Hoel who at last comes to kiss little Nellie. As a droplet of oil he nests upon the surface of her carrot-ginger soup, displacing mass, yet not sinking in. Now he's spooned and sliding over the pearly escarpment, river-valleying her tongue, flowing beneath the hanging gardens of epiglottis, then over the crest of the falls and down her undulating, swanny gorge. Such an age, such an age—when a club-footed little Cockney, and a filly into the bargain, can attain to a

such a stratum—pushing her spoon away, lifting her elbow to the requisite height, tilting the polished silver rim against her lip, then parting subtly, and drawing in, priming the manna's flow—not slurping it down in hasty drafts as would Jim the Pimp, who, if anyone asked, could truthfully say, as he tends the azaleas in the garden back of his little brick semi, that Nellie takes right good care of him and Missus Jim: there's no girl like 'er—never 'as an' never will be.

Nellie: light of the city of rage, toast of Crimea, queen of the limelight from Glasgow to Cameroon, from Sheboygan to the Aunt Tillies, from Saigon to the horn of Chile. Nellie: such sweetness pours from those lips! We never 'eard you then, Nellie. And just lookit you now—now the 'ole world 'as embraced you!

Thus oildrop Hoel plumbs the once-forbidden belly from inside, amidst the action of frolicsome endocrine playmates, who sporting with him, press outward just enough to cause a demure yet emphatic belch to issue forth, just shy of an hour later, as Nellie's diaphragm drops to take on air for the high E that never fails to bring down the house:

*I've come to this great city
to find a brother dear,
And you wouldn't dare insult me, Sir—
if Jack were only here!*

And awash in the commingled din of crazy applause and gastric transmutation, chemical Hoel embarks on his digestive pilgrimage, even as Nellie boards train for the Channel steamer, in company with her young surgeon-lover, who driven mad by her warbling has bent on sparing not one iota of his art toward unclenching that gammy foot—no more hop-scrape for Nellie—just smooth strolling, in tandem, down life's arcaded lane forevermore. Fervid glances as their sole compartment-mate debarks at _____, whereupon our surgeon springs up, latches the door, draws down the blind, unhooks the special boot, and with hands dry and determined palpates the tender club.

And all this leads to the moment when our Nellie—rebooted some'at later and ensconced within the WC—deposits one particular Hoel upon the crossties and again returns him, body mass and essence, to the soil. Ah, physiocracy: gentle, mysterious and profound!

And Nellie sings on, and dances too, and plays at tennis in those ridiculous long skirts that not long from now will vanish like the War and influenza, and bobs her hair and dances more, even as Hoel remains trapped in a demonic cycle, never progressing beyond fungus, while another Hoel, the one who invested in cables and munitions, organizes his animal form and advances his fortunes, if not precisely *himself*.

And on her other foot, six toes, now trimmed to five. And upon her right palm inscribed: a life of four score years and seven, and a head line that just cuts off—chop!—as though truncated by the passion of the song itself.

The Not-Long Chapter In Which Hoel Seeks and Discovers the Hortus Conclusus.
Hoel old and stooped over and ridden with gout. Hoel betting against the pound,

then with it, then bringing it down. Hoel panting in the ruins. Sir Hoel pushing back the gates of Badidabadeye to find his children gone and Mrs. Captain Bagman insensible and invalid, and Malcolm, trembling with parasites, swilling quinine—an immovable object slumped within his flightless wingchair.

In actuality, Hoel finds a weathered oaken door set into the stone arch of a brick wall. He grips the handle with liver-spotted hand, puts thumb to latch and leans his stick-like frame against the timber. Cre-eak. Hoel's garden of expectations overgrown. All deserted. Except for Nebuchadnezzar, sitting with his feet up on an ottoman and smoking a ziggurat. And civilization growing younger with every exhale through the streaming bubble ring. Hoel, too, looks down to see his crippled knees unknitting, and in the sky, a flight of seabirds, so far inland! And the Captain's wife, Mrs. Bagman, rising from the dead, sitting straight up, like the grave was a four-poster on the original ship, and the machine age so much morning air in which to stretch and brush the spiny crumbs off the shoulders of your shroud. Wake up, Hoel-vine, wake up and smell the wisteria. *Come back to me as a man.* Bells, bells. There's a sterncastle for you, high as a cathedral wall. Must test that great, high bell—the greatest ever cast—lest when it's needed most it fails. Now, Hoel, pick the crust out of your inner eye corners. Shut the gate behind you. Return, Hoel, return—back into the salt mines of luxury.

Dong!

Dong! It's tolling, Hoel—it works. This is your moment come. Let's say you shoot the Duchess and instead of drumming you out of the corps, Pinchback, Vidalia, Thebes, Ottavio, and Terzerima fall all over themselves making excuses: *Bloody flintlocks—always going bang at the wrong moment! Well shot, Captain—damned shame about the old gal, but still, well shot! Oh an impulsive lad's our Hoel—but you're only young once*

...

We've been here before. On the cusp of discovering a folk hero. Certainly the late Duchess was not universally adored. Any number of the tenants she replaced with sheep would've gladly taken a whack at her. And though crown and pulpit inveighed against your breach of order, in the back of most minds, some small creature stood up on its hind legs and cried *hurrah!* So stick to your guns, Hoel. Don't let yourself be covered o'er so lightly. You can live a thousand lives, ten thousand times richer than you imagined when first you climbed the spiral steps to catapult your slender being through the casement slit—out over the foam beating fallen columns and parts of men, waves smashing to mist along the corniche seawall. What you need more than anything now, Hoel, is hope. Even something so white with trapezoidal imminence as a topgallant sail cresting over the rim of a big, high hill.