

Chapter One

Pete set his hands on his chair as if about to get up and settle the Fraser Davis question head-on, but he stayed exactly where he was. Funny how much weaker he felt in confrontations these days – physically for sure, but spiritually also because of his relegation to this horrible, makeshift, backroom studio, where drabness and failure hung like curtains all around.

Marj bore down on him through her black butterfly glasses. Her bulk oppressed him.

“You have to speak to him, Pete.”

“Please don't say that, Marj. Just block his calls. Block his number.”

Could anyone out there imagine such sluggish people as Marjory in Light Entertainment? Where were the professionals of yesteryear, gentlemen of nimble wit and frame? Clement Freud? Derek Nimmo? Kenneth Williams?

“He's really very insistent, Pete.”

“So are you, Marjory. So. Are. You.”

Now she set her fingertips on his desk and braced herself above him. No fear, no inhibition, no manners. That childish blue ring she always wore, some seaside trinketry, hippy jewellery to go with her frizzed hair. And there was a whiff of lonely booze coming off her tonight. Fraser had been her secret drinking buddy. What wonderfully gay, self-serving conversations they must have had, and so left-wing, of course. Any port in a storm.

“There has to be closure, Pete.”

“Never use that word here, Marj. Not with me. How dare you?”

“That's why he keeps coming back. Only you can close this. He only asks for you. You have to deal with the closure, Pete. No one else can.”

At this point Cliff loomed up at the studio glass like some monster of the deep – Hey guys! What's up, guys?

Pete felt his willpower shrivel up. He just couldn't handle an extended quarrel. He lowered his head and talked down to the controls.

“Okay.” So feeble in confrontations, these days. So feeble. Feeble. Feeble! “I'll call him. End of break. Then I can keep it short.”

“He's calling from a hotel.”

Pete looked up, alarmed.

“Here?”

Marj shook her head and consulted a scrap of paper. “Peacehaven, of all places. The Old Ship, Peacehaven. Here's the number. He's desperate, Pete. Flat broke. Can't even pay his hotel bill.”

“And what business is that – ” Pete began, looking up, but his words died in the soundproofing. Peacehaven, of all places, was an expensive rail fare away. He didn't take the proffered scrap of paper.

“I have changed my mind,” he announced, and he sat back and proceeded with formality now, each word clear and distinct, no contractions, no exclamations. “I will not speak to Fraser Davis. Full stop. I am neither going to accede to your demands, Marjory, nor to his. I will not stoop to any of this. That is all. And that is final.”

Marjory shook her head, but not in defeat. She was behaving just like the worst kind of caller: the same righteous indignation on behalf of a no-hope, lame duck cause. Pete knew she thought him uncaring, vain, unworthy – irresolute! – all the things he wasn't meant to be, which was ridiculous because they both understood he was all those things, and worse. The idea that he should care about Fraser Davis, of all people, was as stupid as supposing he cared about any of the callers, night after endless night. No man is an island bullshit.

But then Cliff breezed in. He just couldn't keep his nose out of it. Marjory stepped back to give the cavalry room, and now there were two of them, virtually side by side, and the same height as well: two tall, youngish, heavyish bodies, full of health and bulk, bearing down in the poky studio.

“Some good calls tonight, Pete. Wouldn't you say?”

Cliff's manner was permanently upbeat. His way of never being sympathetic. Tonight Pete had had a dreadful time of it. Good calls? Just before break they'd let through a drunk – something that should never, ever happen – No Drunks! Rule Number One! Golden Rule! – and the man was a certifiable lost cause. A sad and angry immigrant, one Geoff Usmah, Osmah, Uzmah, a Samoan of all things, whose family had quit and gone back to Samoa, or American Samoa, or New Zealand, the man couldn't remember, didn't know, had lost track of where his own kith and kin had finished up. A stranded, sodden, uneducated guy, full of sound and fury, ranting away on his thirty-something birthday about the difference between being 'lonesome' and 'alone', about how he knew some special secret – but didn't they always know a secret? – a conspiracy against him and all his kind, which led to him being paid in counterfeit money – Monopoly money, he said – and on and on like that, some stream of rubbish that ran so fast and bitter Pete couldn't keep his head above the bile, the offal, the waffle, the trashy politics. Cliff's call team were at fault for letting him through, but Pete knew – Oh, how he

knew it so well! – that if he said anything to that effect, the pressure would come back on him for how he'd handled the situation, and he hadn't handled it well. He knew that too. He'd told the fellow to shut up and get the hell off the air. It might have been worse than that. Whatever he'd said, he'd never said it before.

His own rot inside pressing through, at last.

Cliff produced his list. "Some interesting ones coming up. Not bad for a second half . . ." He examined the list, ignoring the sullenness of his presenter. "You'll start with four, maybe five lonely hearts."

Pete sighed.

"We're not one hundred percent on a couple of them," Cliff added, lightening the load. "Too volatile, maybe." He flipped his list, turned it back again, then glanced meaningfully at Pete. "You have to go gently with them, Pete. Ease off a little."

At that, Pete couldn't look at his producer. His eyes flitted about his desk, between the few controls he had left. This referred to how he'd dealt with Uzmah and his bibulous philosophizing. Well, how do you deal with an uneducated, drunken loudmouth, Cliff? And why did your team let him through anyway? Maybe they were having a blast at your expense, as well as mine? But Pete raised none of these things. To warrant a mention as directly as this from one as lazy and as indifferent as Cliff, the Uzmah incident must have been worse than he'd thought. He must have hit the wrong tone completely. After this studio, he had to remember, there weren't any other studios. Did he actually swear at the guy? Get the fuck off the air, you sodden jerk! That's certainly what he'd been thinking, but did he actually say anything approaching that, expletives deleted? Surely not.

"There's some trivia, some weight problems," Cliff continued. Now that he'd unsettled Pete he could move on, stroking his long chin, scanning his list. "They're coming back, the weight problems . . ." Pete held his peace. Weight problems? You should be so lucky. "To round off we've got a quack dietician from Lincolnshire. Doctor McGuire. Zen Buddhist. Old school mountebank. You'll get along fine." How Cliff loved to throw in words like that, flaunting his education, and in front of Marjory too. That was why he could never do what Pete was doing. But Cliff didn't want the common touch. He liked it behind the glass, out of sight and permanent.

Cliff folded his list and turned to Marjory. "Excuse me, Marjory. I thought you'd finished with Mr Moran."

Marjory slipped away without another word.

People were very nervous of Cliff these days, Pete noted, yet Marjory had been so cool and brazen with him. It was the proprietary thing: a little fame in decline and anyone could say whatever they liked to you, right to your face.

Cliff ran his fingers up and down the crease of his list. It was plain he wanted to go but he knew he had to hear this out. Everyone was talking about the malaise on *Your Call!* these days.

“What was all that about?”

“Just a caller.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Nope. Forget about it.”

“But Marjory looked upset.”

Pete sat back and dry-washed his face.

“It was that guy again.”

“Dirty caller? I always miss them.”

“No. Davis. Fraser Davis.”

“Fraser Davis!” Cliff looked genuinely perplexed. “What did he want?” He stared at the floor a moment. “I had a letter the other day. Snail mail.” Cliff seemed exasperated, recalling that letter. “Hand-written. Crazy stuff. Like a suicide note. Hotel stationery. Libellous. All this shit about you and me. I tore it up.”

“It's always me, though, Cliff, in the end,” Pete said, leaning forward and speaking in earnest and sombre tones, just this side of self-pity. “Always, always me. He's called a dozen times since we dumped him. He gets to Marjory first, then me. There was something between him and Marjory, you know?”

Cliff scowled at that. “Marjory?” Now he was even more impatient, irritated, confused. “But he was one of yours, wasn't he? You enjoyed him once, didn't you?”

Pete blinked and forced a smile. “Only once, Cliff. At the start. There was no reprise. I didn't like him. Not as a person.”

Cliff scowled at the floor. Shook his head.

“First he comes up with these ideas,” Pete continued. “Special guest ideas. New ways of fronting his graphology, wittering on about that. Then he starts in at me about contracts. Oral contracts. Commitments. Legalities.”

At the mention of legalities Cliff pulled in his incipient gut. His long face became grave. He looked as if he were about to set his arms akimbo, re-plant his feet on the bridge of an ocean liner.

Pete couldn't remember when, but a doctor had once told him that human faces can be catalogued in three types: horse, dog, or cat. That's it. End of the evolutionary line. No more moulds. Consolation of a kind for the ill-favoured. When Cliff was trying to fake sincerity his face looked so long and horsey he might canter off any moment.

“That's not on, Pete!” he now declared. “I'm not having anyone on my team harassed by an arsehole like Fraser Davis!”

Even though Cliff was so much younger and he did the paternalistic bit so hammily, Pete was a sucker for it. He knew this and it

made him despise himself. It made him feel – and how this phrase echoed with him these days – emotionally retarded.

Cliff's long jaw wandered ruminatively after his pledge, and Pete stared up at his latest, reluctant producer, and thought thoughts he never shared with him nor anyone else. He thought about how much he loathed being homosexual, no matter how he pretended to be so open and at ease about it. Remarks like that – 'One of yours, wasn't he?', 'You enjoyed him once, didn't you?' – just sickened him. How he loathed being different in that precious way, of all ways. And how he loathed his corollary preference, developed over the years, for solitude, and for being, as he saw it, therefore condemned to life as an emotional child. Not Pete Moran, but Peter Pan. The self-pity welled up. He couldn't hold it back. It came in such a rush it choked him.

Cliff's arms really were akimbo now: he'd made a decision.

"Next time Davis calls, put him through to me. I'll shit all over him."

"Cliff," Pete began. "You need to know something."

"Oh?"

"I was at the clinic this afternoon . . ."

A silence fell between the two men; an impasse that exposed the true distance between the youngish producer – the career man, still with plans, hopes, ambitions – and his elderly dj: the has-been, sitting tight, clinging on, getting by, doing what he was damn well told.

In the poker silence Cliff held his peace, reluctant to make this easy for Moran. Moran's reputation as a neurotic and hypochondriac was the stuff of radio folklore. It clung to him like the scent of booze clings to an alcoholic. Same weakness. Self-pity. In and out of private clinics for this test and that, spending a fortune in Harley Street and Wimpole Street, because the NHS wasn't good enough for him. The NHS told him the truth: we're overstretched; stop wasting our time. Then the threat of Aids had made him much worse, much more nervous. He'd taken trips abroad for his health, like some eighteenth century aristocrat or poet, to retreats and clinics in Germany and Switzerland. It was a standing joke the money he spent in those places. Every cent from his ads, and in his heyday the contracts for Moran's ads – those double-glazing ads! Pet food ads! Power-tool ads! – always something for the home, the family nest, something DIY was favourite, when the man was a complete butterfingers himself! – Couldn't hammer in a nail! Couldn't fix a plug! – but those ads had been the envy of every presenter in Light Entertainment, they gathered their own momentum, they fed off each other, and every cent from Moran's ads, and from his guest appearances, his voice-overs and so on, went straight into the pockets of the quacks in these private clinics, into the Savile Row pockets of these charlatans and mountebanks.

"The Bartholdt?"

Pete had enthused about this brand new, state-of-the-art clinic. A Belgian outfit in Holland Park that took up half a mews. They were expanding into cosmetic surgery, as if that wasn't a giveaway.

Pete nodded.

"More tests?"

"Nope." Pete crossed his arms. "No more tests, Cliff."

For Pete Moran, sitting perfectly still behind his control desk in this backroom studio, this final studio, his arms folded across his chest, here was the moment he'd been waiting for. The vindication of ascending all those marble steps and pushing open all those white swing doors into London's fancy clinics.

"They want to operate."

Cliff frowned. "They've found something?"

"They want me in tomorrow after the show. They'll monitor me overnight, then operate early Sunday morning. Scrub up at seven."

"This Sunday, you mean?"

"They want me in now, Cliff. Straightaway."

I bet they do, Cliff thought. "Pete, that's awful for you, and I'm so sorry. Such a load on your mind."

"Biopsy. That's all they'd say."

I bet that's all they'd say, Cliff thought. Look under here, nurse. These organs are made of solid gold.

"Pete, take tomorrow off. You're tired. You're depressed. We'll try Robbie Smith."

"No, Cliff."

Pete calmly shook his head, but inside he screamed, *NO, CLIFF!* Not Robbie Smith! The vulgar little man from Nottingham, who got his laughs with endless innuendoes, or stories about picking your nose or farting and so on. Smith had created a new machismo out of vulgarity. In the toilets last week he'd called out – "Pete! I know your stench! Take your Death Star outta White City, for fuck's sake!"

"He's good, Pete."

Pete stared up squarely at his producer. "That's not what I want. I'd rather be working. It sounds morbid but it's good to listen to other people's problems right now."

Cliff softened, shrugged his shoulders. "Now give me the calls," Pete said, extending a pale hand.

Chapter Two

When Geoff Osmah woke up in the morning, every morning, without exception, he did not want to live. He got out of bed and dressed himself and walked to work for nothing more than a bacon sandwich and a cup of tea. His job, polishing and valeting cars on the shabbier forecourts of Stoke Newington, Islington and Holloway, took him on a circuit where several cafés offered breakfast for less than two pounds. No matter which cafe, there was always gristle in the bacon, but it was the sandwich rather than the tea that separated him from suicide.

His friends – men in pubs – ignored or talked down his despair, or were too bored by it to be of any help. They wrote off his suicidal threats as piss-talk. But they were wrong, those friends. For the last few months, every night towards closing time, when he came back from the bar with his Guinness, Geoff's features had been locked in an open secret: booze offered neither euphoria nor the maudlin mood any more. He drank only to put himself out, off, under. And in the morning his hangovers dragged him out of bed to the toilet, and along his trammelled routes to work, to the comfort of that pot of tea and bacon sandwich, then on to the freezing bucket and chamois, six days a week, and he worked Sundays to death as well given half the chance.

Recently, the idea of doing something rash, reckless, even criminal, before he 'checked out', as he liked to put it, in his more romantic moods, had acquired an allure. But he had no idea yet what kind of criminal he might become. He'd never broken the law in his life. Back in the mid-seventies, twenty years before this story takes place, when he'd started out as a semi-skilled man, a shuttering carpenter, earning a good wage on north London's redevelopment sites, there had been plenty of crime, heavy crime and light-fingered crime, going on all around him. It was the way of life then but he took no part in it. Not because he was scared or above it all, but simply because he was having too much fun. He looked back upon those years as golden now, when he was a known face in all north London's live music pubs, such as The Hope & Anchor in Islington or the notoriously violent Three Crowns (or Broken Crowns) in Stoke Newington. He blamed the downturn in the building cycle for his sackings from various sites, rather than his lunchtime sessions and his terminal unreliability. In the eighties he'd slipped to unskilled work – hospital porter, hotel porter, warehouse packer – and in the nineties he'd fallen into the grasping, grubby hands of the cleaning agencies.

Women liked him, but they weren't any help either because their affections were always skin-deep. They liked the gentle curves of his

face, and the long ovals of his brown eyes, set rather wide apart, and they liked to touch his hair, cut in a neat, brown, curly mat, finishing square at the neck. They liked his body, which all his walking and labouring had kept in good shape. And though they never said as much, they liked to be seen out with him. Put a pair of reflecting sunglasses on Geoff Osmah, and a police uniform, sit him on a Harley-Davidson, and he could have been a tv cop of yesteryear – Hawaii Five-O or Charlie's Angels. But his part would only be that of some attendant officer, a one-liner part: 'That's a ticket, ma'am.' 'Pull over, sir.' 'Gimme back up!' 'Let's get the hell outahere!'

But there was one aspect of his appearance no woman liked at all. His moustache was a rich, tobacco gold affair with lighter flecks in it, but it was too stiff, too rounded and bulbous, almost a walrus moustache from the sixties. Thick curls of it strayed over his lip and brushed the creamy head of his Guinness – sucked on it, he was fond of saying. When he lewdly repeated that joke, pint after pint, his girlfriends grew bored and disgusted, but he wouldn't shave off his moustache for any of them. He'd had it since youth, when it had been part of his general flamboyance. As soon as he shaved it off he knew he'd enter middle-age.

By dismissing him from *Your Call!* in the twilight hours of his thirty-eighth birthday, dj Pete Moran had triggered the endgame for Geoff Osmah, but Geoff's mood was already so low and unalterable he didn't even notice. The next morning, without fuss, without emotion, he knew what had to be done. Everything fitted together, made a natural sense to him. It was as if Moran had shown him a way and given him permission – Oh, and Geoff, if you ever decide to hang up the chamois for good, what you need to do is . . .

So on Saturday August 5th, 1995, Geoff Osmah didn't go to work. He didn't eat the gristly bacon sandwich that morning. Instead, he got up late and dressed in his best clothes: a Clydella shirt with paisley tie (that took him an age to knot), a pale green windcheater, a pair of creased grey slacks, and some cheap, new plastic brogues. The very smartest outfit he possessed. Then he abandoned his rooms on the Balls Pond Road and all his belongings therein. He walked out on himself forever. He thought of his departure in this dramatic way but actually there wasn't much to leave behind. Not even a phone or tv or scrap of carpet. Only his much loathed and treasured radio alarm clock.

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When he arrived at Victoria railway station, just after midday, Geoff was hot and agitated. His clothes were all wrong for the close August heat. But this discomfort meant nothing: inside there had been no change in mood

or resolve. After checking the departure board for the Brighton trains, he drifted to a newsstand to buy a copy of The Times. Here was another sign. He'd never read The Times in his life. When he bought a newspaper it was The Daily Mirror, which he only read for the racing guide. The stallholder was about to serve him but turned away to serve a well groomed, important looking man in a pinstriped suit instead. Geoff immediately took offence and became angry and absurdly loud. He shouted at the stallholder, with his head down, his arm straight out –

“Give me the fuckin' Times, man! Give me it now! Give me the fuckin' paper!”

“All right, all right, brother,” the stallholder replied, interrupting his transaction with the pinstriped gentleman. “Calm down, calm down . . .”

But Geoff wouldn't calm down. His manner was the same with the woman at the ticket office. He barked demands for information about departures and arrivals he didn't need. Passengers in the other queues turned in his direction. Some frowned at one another, others looked around for help in uniform.

“I said what time does the fuckin' three-ten get in? You listening to me, you old tramp?”

“Sir, the three-ten gets in at platform two at sixteen-o-eight. That's eight minutes past four, sir.”

“So what time does the fuckin' four-twenty get in? And which fuckin' shithole platform? You old whore.”

Once he'd boarded his Brighton train he quelled the riot of bad feeling inside and brooded over political stories he never normally read, and which were difficult to understand without any contextual knowledge. He broke up his reading with restless trips to the buffet car for beer and sandwiches. He moved among his fellow passengers with a frowning intensity, oval eyes narrowed, keen to check everyone out and judge what they were up to, what they were reading or talking about. He glanced over men's shoulders and into women's laps, taking in everything he could. Businessmen or professionals about to leave their seats stopped themselves, hesitated in their dark suits until he passed by with his untidy armfuls of Guinness cans and sandwich packets; and Geoff enjoyed that acknowledgement from these besuited men, that giving way.

On the other hand he treated the women he met with a gentlemanly courtesy that was all but theatrical. At the carriage junction he stopped to let an ancient, blue-rinsed lady pass by to her First Class compartment.

“You first, ma'am,” he said, and nodded and smiled.

In the buffet car he invited a plump student in black, a Goth, with noisy silver bangles, to queue ahead of him so he could stare down at her buttocks, all his anger melting into lust. The girl matched his theatricality with a coy, one-sided smile and whispered, “Why, thank you.”

“That's okay,” Geoff replied, breathing beer all over her neck. “No hurries, no worries.”

But this courtesy came undone when it failed to produce the right effect. On the way back to his seat he met a second elderly lady, companion to the first, and he stood back for her and smiled just as he had for her friend:

“You first, ma'am.”

But this ancient neither smiled sweetly nor thanked him. She remained aloof and snubbed him with racist contempt. Geoff stepped up behind her and delivered a rabbit punch, right up close, his beery whisper puffing apart her grey perm –

“You wanna learn some fuckin' manners, you fuckin' slag, d'you hear?”

Despite that incident, on arrival in Brighton he became warmer and more expansive and more genuinely emotional towards both man and womankind, because his greetings now were also valedictory. He walked up and down the promenade, *The Times* folded beneath his arm, dispensing smiles and Good Afternoons to all and sundry, stopping now and then to brace himself against the rusted railings, to take some final gasps of sea air, and to gaze out over the English Channel, using as his model here a picture of a moustachioed Edwardian, in top hat and tails, that he'd seen in a daguerreotype postcard on a seafront stall. He didn't know why that picture stayed in his mind – the single man forward against the railings, the long-skirted, parasoled women passing behind – but it did, and he couldn't help himself posing in that way.

The thing was settled when two tiny children ran up behind as he stood at the railing, as if to spook him. A boy and a girl, both in dungarees, maybe twins, no more than three or four years old, full of milk-toothed mischief. He smiled down at them with amusement and affection, eyes tearing up, then offered curt good-luck salutes to their well-heeled, smiling, complacent parents, and turned away in a blur towards Roedean and Rottingdean, to reconnoitre the cliffs.

Anyone who has contemplated stepping off a cliff will attest to the difficulty Geoff faced that Saturday afternoon, and will forgive him. The idea of moving either leg into open space, or of jumping or diving from the edge, bending his knees to push off, feeling the updraught against his face, or maybe standing stiff and upright and falling off arms wide, like an olympic diver, or rolling himself into a ball and going over blind, head tucked in – each way felt more difficult than the last. Running at it was

worst of all because of the divided sense that his body itself – arms, legs, heart, still full of health and strength – had become a separate and pitiable thing, and to make it propel itself to its destruction on the rocks below seemed somehow cruel and unfair.

At a quarter past six Geoff approached The Belvedere, a Brighton beach bar, after a long walk back down the coast from Telscombe Cliffs. On his way he'd come across a nudist bathing area in a cove near Telscombe and that had detained him, though he'd not descended and disrobed himself. The cove had been very busy, and his heart and step were heavy after the long walk back from all that naked and vulnerable humanity. He burned for the relief of his first drink.

But a display in the bay window of The Belvedere caught his eye and delayed rest and recovery, kept him standing outside on the pebbles, which hurt his feet through the thin soles of his hot plastic brogues.

Many dream of meeting someone who will change their lives completely. Not only change their prospects but change the way they think and feel about themselves forever. On his seaside breaks Geoff had squandered his share of holiday funds on fortune tellers, mainly for the pleasure of sitting in a private, confined space with a pretty woman and enjoying her undivided attention, while she held and stroked his hand. There were any number of mock gypsy girls in private tents along the seafront – some were university students, or said they were – who were prepared to sell fifteen minutes in this way, and other ways. But this warm August evening he was tempted to try something far more serious and scientific, and without any ulterior motive.

The display taped in the bay window of The Belvedere promoted, 'An Evening with Fraser Davis'. Fraser Davis, the celebrated graphologist, was offering Consultations starting at £5, and scaling up to £25. This last was for a 'Full character analysis of an unnamed third party'. The Terms & Conditions of the Consultations began by setting graphology apart from the seaside arts already familiar to Geoff – palmistry, astrology, tarot cards – and continued with some dense legalese about Fraser Davis's liabilities and indemnities that Geoff didn't bother to read. Other features of the display drew his eye.

Two copies of Mr Davis's book, *The Graphologist's Art*, were taped to the inside of the bay window, separated by a pane of dimpled glass central to both window and display. On the left, the window pane offered the front cover of the book: the title was in copperplate and all around it, on a parchment background, were incomplete scribbles in many hands, containing lines such as – *'If only I could love him'*, and *'Outraged that she could behave so, I took the unprecedented step of'* and *'I feel I can confide in you alone that'* and so on. The sense of these snippets was broken up by dated, and in some cases positively ancient, celebrity signatures, dashed off at all angles in primary colours. Sean Connery in

green, Barbara Windsor, Kenneth Williams and Ken Dodd in bright red, Jacques Cousteau in blue, Bob Hope and Burt Reynolds in violet, Eric Morecambe, Frank Muir, Ernie Wise, Jimmy Savile and Pete Moran in beige or brown. There were many names Geoff did not know, and still more he did not read.

Taped above the front cover and to the right, the other side of the dimpled glass, the second copy was opened at a Foreword written by Pete Moran. Most striking to Geoff, above the Foreword was an accompanying cameo of Moran. This held Geoff for some time. Moran's smiling, ageless face, topped with coiffured bouffant, set above his text and signature, possessed a sense of accomplishment Geoff could not understand. Eventually he passed to the text itself:

Everyone loves a success story. It is my very great and personal pleasure to write a foreword to The Graphologist's Art for Fraser Davis, who has fascinated so many listeners with his expert analysis since he joined Your Call! Many of his interpretations are included in this volume, with the original scripts painstakingly preserved.

There's something here for everyone, as they say! The secret sleuths among us will also enjoy Fraser's anecdotes from his work with the Metropolitan Police, where his brilliance has contributed to the solution of some of the most notorious 'crimes of our times!'

This is a treat to savour.

Enjoy!

Pete Moran

Geoff felt a sense of anticipation about the evening ahead out of all proportion to his interest in Fraser Davis and The Graphologist's Art. He had listened to *Your Call!* many times, and he had some memory of this Fraser Davis, though he'd never been such a regular special guest as

Moran's Foreword suggested. The graphology stuff just started off his endless, boring stories about this or that celebrity or unsolvable crime.

Geoff glanced around the other pages of the display, looking for a picture of Davis, but he found none. The cameo of Moran seemed to have displaced the authorial photograph.

He stalled before the memory of his own call to Pete Moran – just last night, not even a day ago. He had to hide from that memory, as he was hesitating and hiding now, outside The Belvedere, as if this Fraser Davis might point him out when he entered the bar and name and shame him at the door. 'That's him! He's the drunk from last night! Watch out, everybody!'

Each and every word of his call to Pete Moran Geoff had known by heart. They were words he'd rerun a thousand times against the odds of his life. He'd been sharing them, as he had done so many times before, with a new young friend he'd just made in a quiet bar called The Hunter, on Dove Road, a five minute walk from home. At closing time his one-sided conversation had drawn his new friend with him along the street to a Chinese, where Geoff had paid for two chicken chow mein. Then on to his new friend's flat, Geoff still talking, even when his host put on the radio and raised the volume. This new friend, much younger than Geoff, young enough to be his son, in fact, nodded his way through his chow mein while listening to Geoff going on and on, and to Pete Moran murmuring his counsel to various lonely, broke or desperate callers in the background, and he scraped out his aluminium tray while Geoff borrowed his phone to make his very own breakthrough call to *Your Call!*

And now here were those other lives – of Fraser Davis, and Moran himself – right here, brought down out of that mellow world of cultured voices murmuring truths on the radio, and photographs in magazines in barbers' shops, and cameos in books like this, brought down out of the ether and Sellotaped to a window of The Belvedere, Geoff's favourite watering hole in all of Brighton.

Now Geoff overcame his hesitation. He felt that criminal impulse rising – violent, vengeful impulse – stirring inside him like a sexual excitement. He would meet Mr Davis. Oh yes. He'd join the queue. He'd have a Consultation this very evening.

He glanced around the bar as he breezed in, searching the dim and cavernous depths of the place, expecting to find a hub of activity somewhere. But the bar was virtually empty. The evening with Fraser Davis should have been underway for at least half an hour, but there was no sign of the event at all. Perhaps this was Davis's night off, or he was stuck in traffic someplace.

Waiting for his Guinness, Geoff caught sight of a white jacketed figure sitting alone in the second bay at the front of the pub, and he knew immediately who it was. The man sat obliquely and was perfectly still,

staring out the window at the pebble beach and the sea beyond, at people coming for an evening stroll on the stony and littered wastes, before heading home or moving on to a restaurant or club.

On the table before him was a low stack of paperbacks, just three or four books, and a box beneath the table perhaps contained more of the same, or pens and paper and a magnifying glass for the graphology Consultations.

Geoff paid for his Guinness, a wordless exchange with the sullen, lanky barman, swallowed a couple of draughts, licked the froth off his moustache, then strolled over, taking his time, making a detailed preliminary assessment between the bar and the bay window.

Davis's white jacket was actually an old tuxedo, and a white dress shirt beneath lent him a distinguished formality in *The Belvedere*. His goatee was grey but his shoulder length hair was still dark, and thrown back from his brows in a professorial style. That hairstyle, together with a dash of colour from an ancient, droopy, red bow tie, and a matching bandanna in his breast pocket, lightened his formality with a touch of artistic waywardness. He wore his golden half-moon glasses halfway down his nose, so that he might divide his attention between the book open in front of him, *The Graphologist's Art*, and the view from the bay window down the stony beach to the sea.

Davis remained perfectly still, did not acknowledge Geoff's approach in any way, until Geoff set his Guinness on his table, dangerously close to the low stack of paperbacks, and offered his hand.

"Geoff Osmah."

At last Davis moved.

His handshake was fleeting and palpably reluctant. As Geoff took his place on the curved window seat for his Consultation, blocking the view of the beach, Davis chuckled and murmured a welcoming remark, something beginning with 'He who pays' and continuing with something like, 'displays', 'defrays', or 'delays', and ending with something like, 'some days' – it was impossible to make out exactly what he said because he spoke in such a low and sibilant whisper. Whatever he'd said, Geoff felt disturbed, soiled, invaded by it, as if Davis's words carried germs across the space between them.

Then Davis smiled at Geoff and this too caused unease: the smile spread, sinking into his goatee to leave no trace of pink flesh, neither lips nor gums. His teeth were thin and grey, part of the surrounding goatee. His face had a Celtic paleness and it was bonier and stronger closer to, resisting the crumpled impression of his slight shoulders and floppy clothes. His eyes were pale also: a pale, hard grey, that was exactly the colour of dental amalgam. Apart from the ancient red bow tie and the bandanna, everything about his appearance contributed to a sense of shifting halftones, covering up something hard and sharp as flint.

What a guy! Geoff thought, reaching for his Guinness. Such an unappealing guy in every way! Little wonder there was no jacket photo in his book!

“Here's to, The Graphologist's Art!” Geoff said, as cheerily as he could.

“Och,” Davis replied, and then murmured something which was again indecipherable, but which was evidently amusing to him because he chuckled at Geoff in a knowing, superior way, as if Geoff had touched on some private joke he couldn't possibly understand.

Again Geoff felt slighted. “What?” he asked. “What did you say?”

“Would you like a wee look at the book?”

Up until now Geoff had been certain that he'd heard this Fraser Davis on the radio, as special guest, with Pete Moran, but the accent was completely wrong. It was Lowlands Scots. He remembered Fraser Davis's cultured English tones: he'd been a bumbling, apologetic fellow – ‘rather this’ and ‘awfully that’ – who would have passed for amusing in the seventies or eighties, in the innocent world of Frank Muir, Denis Norden and Patrick Campbell.

Geoff slouched in his window seat, his pint of Guinness tilted but secure in his labourer's fist. Fraser Davis still smiled, but around his mouth the short grey hairs of his goatee bristled with what might have been open hostility. Geoff's eyes dropped to the box of books at the man's feet. It was a box for Green Giant sweetcorn. There was a picture of the green and yellow giant facing his way. In the box was not The Graphologist's Art but a different volume:

Chew Upon This!

*The Best Forgotten Memoirs
of a Lifetime
in Light Entertainment!*

The jacket of this book had been part of the display outside but Geoff had given it scant attention. He'd absorbed from the blurb some of the landmarks of Davis's career: a song and dance man for the historic *Black & White Minstrel Show*, a quiz panellist on *What's My Line? Call my Bluff!*, and there were some other highlights he hadn't read properly. Finally, though, Davis had been washed up and hung out to dry on *Your Call!* with the ageing, outmoded Pete Moran. But then again, no. Not finally. Finally, it was this: The Belvedere, Brighton beach. This guy was a sordid, depressing failure, Geoff decided. So much for Pete Moran's 'success story'. There was something worrying and rather sinister about him too.

Geoff wanted no more to do with Fraser Davis and he certainly had no intention of parting with any money for a Consultation, thank you very much. He looked about for an exit and saw an empty wine glass the other side of the table. There was a long-resisted sip of sherry or whisky at the bottom.

Geoff drained his pint and stood up.

“Can I buy you one, Mr Davis?”

Without a word Davis quickly tipped back the precious dregs of his drink.

“Ta very much,” he said, with a wink, offering up his empty glass with a grateful chuckle. “At’s a wee single malt . . . Much obliged . . .”

He could speak clearly enough where a drink was concerned, Geoff noted, and set off to the bar with the empty glasses. He left Davis’s at the near end and moved down to where the lanky barman was still standing, arms folded, doing nothing. Why were barmen always like that? Idle, lanky, at ease, staring at nothing, doing nothing, watching television. Why didn’t they get on with polishing glasses or wiping the bar? Geoff hated them as a tribe for their idleness, and for his shameful need of their help to cope with life. He ordered another Guinness and some crisps and nuts, and while his pint was drawn he drifted to the jukebox and selected Willy Nelson, Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton and a few other Country & Western favourites.

With *Blue Eyes Cryin’ in the Rain* the mood in the bar changed and the figure in the tuxedo with his books and Consultations became an instant irrelevance, but Geoff still wanted company.

He told the barman it was his birthday and bought him a drink.

“Which one?”

“Just turned thirty-fuckin’-eight, man. Just yesterday.”

The barman polished a glass for himself.

“Not today then, is it?”

Halfway through his third Guinness, led on by some seventies sounds on the jukebox, Geoff started bragging to the barman about his golden years, about the bands he’d seen at The Hope & Anchor and The Three Crowns or Broken Crowns in north London, bands that had gone on to make it big, like AC/DC and Brinsley Schwarz, Nick Lowe’s old band. Nick Lowe had married Johnny Cash’s daughter and lived in California now. He’d made it. Got out. California. Did the barman know that? Did he know those bands? Those pubs? . . . The barman shook his head and said nothing. Had he ever worked in places like that? Another shake of his weary head, and his eyes fell to his feet. “Hey,” Geoff said, “do you ever have any live music here? At The Belvedere?” The barman shook his head a third time and left him to serve a bunch of students at the other end, with whom he was all smiles and chat and charm.

Geoff's mood soured after his fourth pint, when the students had gone. Half to the barman, half to the bar at large, he let go a series of muttered curses about The Belvedere, about Brighton, about the old woman he'd met on the train – “that fuckin’ hag” – about his “fuckin’ birthday” and his “fuckin’ existence” – at that the barman scowled and stepped closer – “wiping the fuckin’ grime, putting on the fuckin’ shine – ”

“Steady on there,” the barman warned.

“WIPING THE FUCKIN’ GRIME!” Geoff burst out to the empty bar. “ALL AROUND FINSBURY-FUCKIN’-PARK!” he shouted. Then, to the barman directly: “Every fuckin’ forecourt, man. Wiping the grime putting on the fuckin’ shine!”

He turned away and his drunken, angry eyes swivelled in their ovals around the saloon and fastened on Fraser Davis, who apparently had just completed a Consultation. A short man in a corduroy jacket – the man who'd put on the seventies sounds – had just parted with some cash to Davis and now hurried off to the safety of the toilets.

“HEY SHITHEAD!” Geoff bawled at Davis.

Davis turned in Geoff's direction, head lowered, putting away his wallet in his tuxedo, staring back at Geoff over his half-moon glasses.

“KNOW YOUR FUCKIN’ NAME, THEN!”

Davis shook his head and stared, but not at Geoff now. At the barman.

“Any more of that and I'll call the police,” the barman warned loudly. He nodded a reassurance to Davis, who turned back to the bay window.

But Geoff's eruption was over.

In another minute or so he apologised to the barman: “Hey, man. I'm sorry. Won't happen again. No worries. Bad day. Bad birthday.”

“You said that was yesterday.”

“Ah well. Forget about it.”

“I already had.”

Geoff gave up all conversation with the barman. He was drinking on an empty stomach and all too soon he'd reached his Saturday night state of stupefaction: he couldn't trust his hands to raise a full glass to his face. Instead, he bent down, eyes shut, and sipped at the delicious white head of the Guinness, once, twice, three times, up and down, as if taking a libation. A line of froth painted his moustache but he didn't lick it away. The barman, judging his moment to the second, helped Geoff by raising the glass for him, tipping the drink steadily into him, ministering to him like a mother to a baby, while Geoff's eyes slid in their ovals, milky, useless, and blinked for the barman to stop. But the barman did not stop until he'd poured one more mouthful inside Geoff. He set a clean glass under the Guinness tap.

“Gimme a tray,” Geoff said.

“You'll never manage it.”

“Gimme a fuckin' tray and some nuts and crisps. Gimme two packets each. I'm outside.”

With a show of reluctance, the barman did as he was told. Geoff noticed him exchange another glance with the blurry white figure in the bay window, but he was too far gone now to make anything of it.

When he'd paid, Geoff stood and steadied himself, both hands on the bar. He stayed there a few seconds, perfectly still. With infinite care he carried his tray outside to the tables on the stony beach.

By nine his head was on the table and he couldn't sit up. A couple of times he'd slipped off to sleep and was about to do so again when the light was blocked by someone approaching. He thought it was the barman coming to tell him to move on and to threaten him with the police again, but this person set down a box of Green Giant sweetcorn, crushing an unfinished packet of crisps. He drew out a chair on the noisy pebbles and sat down uninvited.

Fraser Davis took from his tuxedo pocket a box of matches and tapped a dozen or so onto the plastic table. He began to arrange them in a pattern.

“Ah bin watchen yeu, Geoff. Watchen yeu with yeur Guinness.”

Something snagged in Geoff's mind about this man's voice. If he could have shaken his head he would have done, but it was nailed by a headache to the table top.

“Not Fraser Davis . . .”

“But Ah am, Geoff,” came the quick reply. “Ah am Fraser Davis. No question about 'at.”

The matchstick pattern was complete. It would have been difficult for Geoff to discern it even if he'd been able to raise his head, because the matches disappeared on the dirty white plastic in the dim light.

“Geoff. Yeu've got te make two wee squares. That's all.”

Geoff's eyes had shut again.

“Yeu can only move three matchsticks. Two wee squares, three matchsticks. Can yeu do that for mah, Geoff?”

At this moment a teenage couple weaved by their table on their way into The Belvedere for a nightcap. They passed so close they brushed Geoff's chair. He opened his eyes, saw their young hips, no more than a metre from his face – the slim male and the shapely female hips. He saw their hands in each other's back pockets. He closed his eyes on what he saw, then slowly opened them again.

“He'll be all right for the night!” Davis said, and he chuckled, causing the pretty girl, whose long brown hair came halfway down her back, to look over her shoulder.

At that look from the girl, first to Fraser Davis, and then to himself – a look of undisguised contempt – Geoff set his right arm across the patio table and swept it steadily across, brushing Fraser Davis's matchsticks, his puzzle, his box of matches, his box of books, the crisp packets, an unfinished glass of Guinness, brushing the whole evening onto the pebbles, where it landed with a thud and a tinkle of broken glass.

He rested his head on his arm and slept.

“Ah'm tellen listeners about Roger Moore on the back of a yacht with a bevy of sixteen year-olds and there's Pete interrupten interferen all the time. Ah said to Rolf Harris once – Rolf's about the only one Ah'd say is worth his salt, the only one Ah'd call a pal of mine, Ah said to Rolf – Rolf, Ah said – ”

Davis switched off the microphone and set it to rest carefully on the table, then clicked the dial of the ancient Grundig to Stop.

Heat from the hotel kitchens carried up smells of English cuisine – boiled cabbage, boiled carrot and roast chicken – and with those smells the noises of clashing dishes and giant pot lids banging down on giant pots, and the occasional burst of mad song or laughter, or a wolf-whistle from some lewd porter or chef – the heat and noise came up pell-mell through the first floor window and assaulted Davis's concentration, weak at the best of times, and quite useless when his grasp on what he was doing was so unsure. The noises and smells of kitchens always offended: he knew them too well.

His paperbacks were no longer pristine. Shards of glass, splashes of Guinness, the muck off the pebbles outside The Belvedere, and the journey back in their wet and broken cardboard box, had left them in a shabby condition, which mocked Davis's efforts to put right the text within. He was engaged in an exercise of utter futility, and he knew that, yet he continued because no other option presented itself. For Davis, survival now meant just one move, one last throw of the die, one meal or drink at a time, one last yank of the one-armed bandit as he passed along the pier, strolling towards Death.

There was a letter in the box somewhere that demanded a rewrite of the second edition of *Chew Upon This!* that would give the memoirs 'more edge', 'more risk', 'more bite'. Any scandalous anecdote about C or even D list names, such as Pete Moran, would do. So Davis was attempting to set down a disloyal and scurrilous opinion here, but based on nothing at all, no anecdote he could exaggerate. He simply did not know what he was talking about.

He checked the counter number in his log, rewound the Grundig to where he'd started this morning, took up the mike and pressed Record for a re-dub.

“Despite Pete's many qualities . . .”

And then again:

“Despite his many qualities, not te mention his experience, with which Ah doonay take issue for a moment, Ah maintain Pete was all wrong for a programme of that kind . . .”

And again:

“Despite Pete's many qualities – ”

He held the mike perfectly still in his right hand, three or four inches below his goatee, and stared intently into the kitchen yard beyond his open window, at the line of kitchen bins out there against a high wall. He steadied his mind and looked past the bins to focus on the wall itself, whose mortar was yellowed with lichen, and he concentrated on the wall, brick by grubby brick –

“not te mention his experience – ”

but then a pot clanged downstairs in the kitchens, some apprentice chef down there, some oaf or school-leaver had dropped a pot of boiling cabbage or carrots, much to everyone's amusement, and Davis shut his eyes, clicked the dial to Stop and set aside the microphone.

He left the Grundig switched on, remembering how long the infernal machine took to warm up, flicked off his slip-on shoes and went to lie down. But no sooner had he folded his hands behind his head and shut his eyes than there was a further disturbance. There was a knock at his door: a gentle, stroking knock.

There it was again.

He was about to curse out loud the chambermaid who came knocking even though he'd hung out the Do Not Disturb sign, when there was a deep, urgent whisper from the other side of the door –

“Fraser? . . . Fraser Davis? . . . Is that you?”

Who the – ?

“Fraser?”

No. Surely not. No no no.

“Fraser? . . .”

It couldn't be. It could not be.

“Fraser? Fraser Davis?”

Davis arose silently and stood in his socks at the end of his bed, steadying himself with two nervous fingers on the knob of the bedstead.

The whisper was low and mild, yet solicitous, demanding. So deep in every way.

“Are you there? Fraser? Hey, I wanna thank you, Fraser. I wanna talk to you . . . Fraser? Can I come in? Can you hear? Can you hear me?”

Davis frowned. He took in a silent breath. It was him, no doubt about it. The brown guy.

“I wanna thank you for what you did for me, Fraser. For helping me out with the police and that. And I wanna say I'm sorry. I wanna say that personally. Can you open the door, Fraser? Please?”

Davis turned to the open window. He stared into the kitchen yard. The high, lichened wall. That line of bins.

A sudden rush of words from the corridor, no holding back now –

“Can you hear me, Fraser? Hey!” Seizing, imploring, pleading, clutching. “Fraser! Listen. I know you're in there. Who's in there with you? I heard you. I can tell you what you said. You said – Despite Pete's many qualities – you said exactly that. You said that again and again, didn't you? I heard you. Didn't you just say that, Fraser? Fraser?”

Davis shook his head at the window.

“And before that, you said Rolf Harris was the only one worth his salt – you said that about him. Worth his salt. Didn't you just say that? I heard you. Worth his salt. Didn't you?”

Davis winced.

“He was the only one who was a pal of yours, you said, and worth his salt.”

This was unfortunate. In the extreme. In extremis. A wee nightmare. Fucken useless police must've given him away as bystander, when they'd no right. No right at all. Given away a fucken Samaritan when he'd helped get said felon off the beach and up the steps into the fucken jam sandwich. Or maybe the barman – that treacherous streak-of-piss, greedy fucker – had heard him give his hotel to the police and had told the brown guy this mornen, when he'd bin back there, asken about his wallet, his money – aye, the barman – even though he'd got his fucken share, barmen were fucken barmen the fucken world over, fucken the world over.

“Fraser? Fraser! Hey! There's no use hiding, man. I know you're in there, Fraser Davis. And I must see you. I have to. Please open the door. Just for a minute. I have to apologise to you. And to thank you. You were

so good to me, helping me out like that with the police . . . Are you listening, Fraser?"

Davis rotated about the bedstead knob and returned silently to his bedside table. He picked up the phone and pressed Reception.

"Reception!" A teenage girl. Keen. Work experience, maybe. "Reception. How can I help? Reception!"

Fucken teenagers all over the place. Why couldn't they hire someone with a bit of fucken maturety who could handle a situation of this gravity?

Davis faced the wall and whispered loudly to the girl down there, loud enough for Geoff to hear, "Listen te mah, darlen," but then continued sotto voce, "Ah can only say this once. There's a man at mah door. Big brown fella worken the corridors botheren guests for cash. At's urgent. Room 149. Ah mean urgent. Ah'm frightened. Yeu've gotta nail this guy. Call security. Ah mean now."

He hung up before she could reply.

"Ah'm listenen te yeu, Geoff," he said, resuming his position at the bedstead, fingers on the knob. "Ah'm listenen te yeu. Fire away."

"Fraser?" Seizing, clutching. "Who are you talking to? Who's in there?"

"Aha!" Davis chuckled lewdly and turned back to the empty bed. "That would be tellen, wouldn't at, darlen?"

In the corridor, Geoff had tucked himself in as close as he could within the shallow door frame. He'd been waiting behind corners, on the emergency stairs, in a stifling laundry room down the corridor, waiting for Fraser Davis to come out for breakfast, or to buy cigarettes, or to go for a walk on the beach, but Davis had not emerged, not for the whole hour and a half he'd been lying in wait.

"Ah'm listenen' te yeu, Geoff. Fire away."

In an agony of apprehension, with his moist forehead pressed against the door, Geoff looked into the folds of his wallet. He had two, crisp, brand new, fifty pound notes, and a single used five pound note. The fifty pound notes were fresh from the bank. His last ones. The very last of their kind. He took one out, careful to separate it from its virgin sibling. He knelt to the floor and with trembling hands began to slip the fifty pound note under the door.

"Fraser. Come and have a drink with me down in the cocktail lounge. What d'you say? You can bring your friend. I'm buying. You were so good to me, man. So helpful. Let me buy you a drink."

Davis chuckled again. "No can do, Geoff. Ah've got a lot of work te do."

"Take a break, for fuck's sake. Just look under the door, man. I mean it. You can see I mean it."

Davis saw the note under the door. He left his position at the bedstead. He bent down, hands on knees, and examined the one third of the £50 note that now showed on the grubby carpet. This guy really couldn't get enough. It was a £50 note all right, just like last night's. For a moment Davis wondered if he hadn't overlooked one. They'd been so new and crisp. But no, he was sure he hadn't.

"Geoff. What're yeu playen at?"

"Let me buy you a drink, Fraser. A single malt. A double. Come on, man. I'm buying. I've got the money right here. Look. Look at it. I got plenty and I gotta thank you personally."

"At's yeur money, Geoff. Ah don't want yeur money. Ah don't need yeur money." Davis spoke down to the note itself, as if it were Geoff's brown face on the note, not Her Majesty's. "Ah doonay want yeur money, Geoff," he repeated. "At's yeur money. Yeu just needed a Samaritan last night, yeu really did. Yeu'd had a skinful. Yeu were a friend in need, that's all. Anyone would've done what Ah did. Most folk, anyways."

Against the other side of the door, Geoff's forehead was ridged in waves of anxiety, troughs of disappointment. He couldn't hang about at the door like this. This wasn't working. This wasn't going to work!

And now he could hear steps on the stairs behind him. Carefully, tantalizingly, he withdrew the £50 note and replaced it with the used £5 note, which wasn't so easy to slide beneath the door, which had to be wriggled and twisted and stuffed.

"Okay, Fraser. Gotta go now, pal. Just take a fiver. Buy yourself a drink. Single malt. Token of my appreciation. You were so good to me. So long now."

Geoff could hear the creaks of floorboards beneath the red carpet. Wheezy breaths coming up, getting closer.

He whipped back his fiver and slipped away.

The other side of the door, a dribble of saliva fell from Davis onto the carpet when he saw the used £5 note whipped away, after just a moment, whereas the £50 note –

"Just a minute, Geoff!" But Geoff was three flights of stairs away. "We'll be ready in a minute! We're getten ready now. Wait there a sec!" Davis turned back to the bed – "Put yeur blouse on, darlen!" – then to the door again – "Stay there, Geoff. We'll be right with yeu!"

Davis straightened and retreated to the bedstead. He grasped the knob. Bending down for so long watching the banknotes come and go had left him faint and unsteady.

"If yeu want te know the truth of at, Geoff," he said to the open window, though Geoff had already left the building, "mah wee lady friend doesn't much appreciate yeur visitation just now. Sorry about that. Does that put yeu in the picture, Geoff? Eh?" Again the lewd chuckle, long and low, to no one. "She's rather eager we continue where we left off before

yeu interrupted, Geoff, if yeu get mah meanen, but we'll be with yeu in a tick. Won't we, darlen? . . . Yeu see, Geoff, we're in no fit state for yeur company just yet. We've got no clothes on, for starters. Ah mean, we're starkers, for starters . . .”

Davis puckered his lipless mouth and sucked a long, wet kiss from the air for Geoff's benefit.

How he regretted last night's opportunism, the rolling of this brown guy, who just couldn't handle it, who couldn't roll with the punch, as it were, couldn't roll over and die as he should, when duty called. You couldn't tell with some folk whether they were allergic to being stung or not.

Now there was a firm rap at the door, and a firmer voice.

“Mr Davis? Hotel Security.”

Davis put the chain on the door before opening it.

The Head Porter's purple face, under a braided cap, was a full head taller than his companion's, the lowly Door Porter, an overweight and asthmatic young man, still puffing from the stairs. Both were identified by hotel lanyards from which they smiled confidently. Beneath their photographs their names were offered to guests in a large and friendly, hand-written font – Len Purvis, Head Porter; Jimmy Wright, Door Porter.

“Yeu useless fucks!” Davis cried. “Where in Christendom have yeu bin?”

Mr Purvis's jaw dropped at this assault.

“Ah could be dead and bugged by now, for all yeur fucken assistance, thank yeu very much. Where were yeu? In the boiler room playen cards, or what?”

“Mr Davis,” Purvis began. “I would ask you to keep a civil tongue.”

“Och, that's as maybe. Fact is there's a big brown guy – gypsy guy – roamen the corridor demanden cash and menacen yeur guests. Now fuck off and do somethen about at!”

Davis slammed the door on Len Purvis and Jimmy Wright.

“Mr Davis! Be assured we shall take this further!”

Davis slouched back to his desk, exhausted by the human abrasion of the last five minutes. Flicking through Chew Upon This!, he rewound the tape to zero and pressed Play, but then killed it with his first utterance. He loathed the sound of his own voice. He switched off the Grundig and went back to his bed to lie down and rest a second time.