

Jilly Cooper is a journalist, writer and media superstar. The author of many number one best-selling novels, including *Riders*, *Rivals*, *Polo*, *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous*, *Appassionata*, *Score!*, *Pandora* and *Wicked!*, she lives in Gloucestershire with her husband, Leo, her rescue greyhound, Feather, and five cats. She was appointed OBE in the 2004 Queen's Birthday Honours List for her contribution to literature.

Find out more about Jilly Cooper and her novels by visiting her website: www.jillycooper.co.uk

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**Acclaim for
PANDORA**

‘A new Jilly Cooper novel guarantees a great summer for everyone . . . She tells a marvellous story with total conviction, and also hooks the reader from the first page. Her latest, an irreverent look at the international art world, is full of fun and sex – and quite unputdownable. This is Jilly at her irrepressible best’ *Publishing News*

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‘Triumphantly good’ *Sunday Times*

‘*Pandora* is the best book Jilly has produced since *Rivals* . . . the action is priceless’ *Sunday Express*

‘*Pandora* is a smart portrait of the venal, greedy and pretentious underbelly of the high art scene . . . Most impressive is [Cooper’s] gift for crowd scenes . . . Cooper moves her cast about in ways that elaborate their characters, fuel the plot and ensure that set pieces are never boring’
Sunday Independent (Ireland)

‘The whole thing is a riot – vastly superior to anything else in a glossy cover’ *Daily Telegraph*

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Independent on Sunday

‘One reads her for her joie de vivre, her maudlin romanticism, her love of arty references and her razor sharp sense of humour. Oh, and the sex’ *New Statesman*

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Independent on Sunday

‘This is Jilly in top form with her most sparkling novel to date’
Yorkshire Post

‘Her priapic fictions – of which *Pandora* is among the best – are a definite force for good. They vibrate with glee and gusto: qualities of which we all need an infusion every now and then’
Observer

‘Cooper possesses story-telling skills that bypass many an aspiring Booker Prize winner . . . Under the playful rollicking and nonsensical high jinks, she deals in serious archetypes . . . Cooper outshines all others’ *Glasgow Herald*

‘Great fun’ *Good Housekeeping*

‘You relish the sheer breathless gusto of her writing, the way she adores her own characters . . . Constantly diverting: funny, inventive and graphic’ *Daily Mail*

‘Well constructed and totally gripping . . . A wonderful, romantic spectacular of a novel’ *Spectator*

‘A new Jilly Cooper is always a treat. *Pandora* is all that you expect from one of her novels; a rollick with some exquisitely naughty people, some of whom we have met before in previous novels . . . Oh the swaggering lives! It’s wonderful . . . It’s a book readers will sneak peeks at, eager to find out if lovers are reunited and villains get their comeuppance. It’s lively. It’s frothy and funny. You have as much fun reading it as you feel Jilly had writing it’ *Waterstone’s Book Quarterly*

By Jilly Cooper

FICTION

Wicked!
Pandora
The Rutshire Chronicles:
Riders
Rivals
Polo
The Man Who Made Husbands
 Jealous
Appassionata
Score!

NON-FICTION

Animals in War
Class
How to Survive Christmas
Hotfoot to Zabriskie Point (with
 Patrick Lichfield)
Intelligent and Loyal
Jolly Marsupial
Jolly Super
Jolly Superlative
Jolly Super Too
Super Cooper
Super Jilly
Super Men and Super Women
The Common Years
Turn Right at the Spotted Dog
Work and Wedlock
Angels Rush In
Araminta's Wedding

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Little Mabel
Little Mabel's Great Escape
Little Mabel Saves the Day
Little Mabel Wins

ROMANCE

Bella
Emily
Harriet
Imogen
Lisa & Co
Octavia
Prudence

ANTHOLOGIES

The British in Love
Violets and Vinegar

PANDORA

Jilly Cooper



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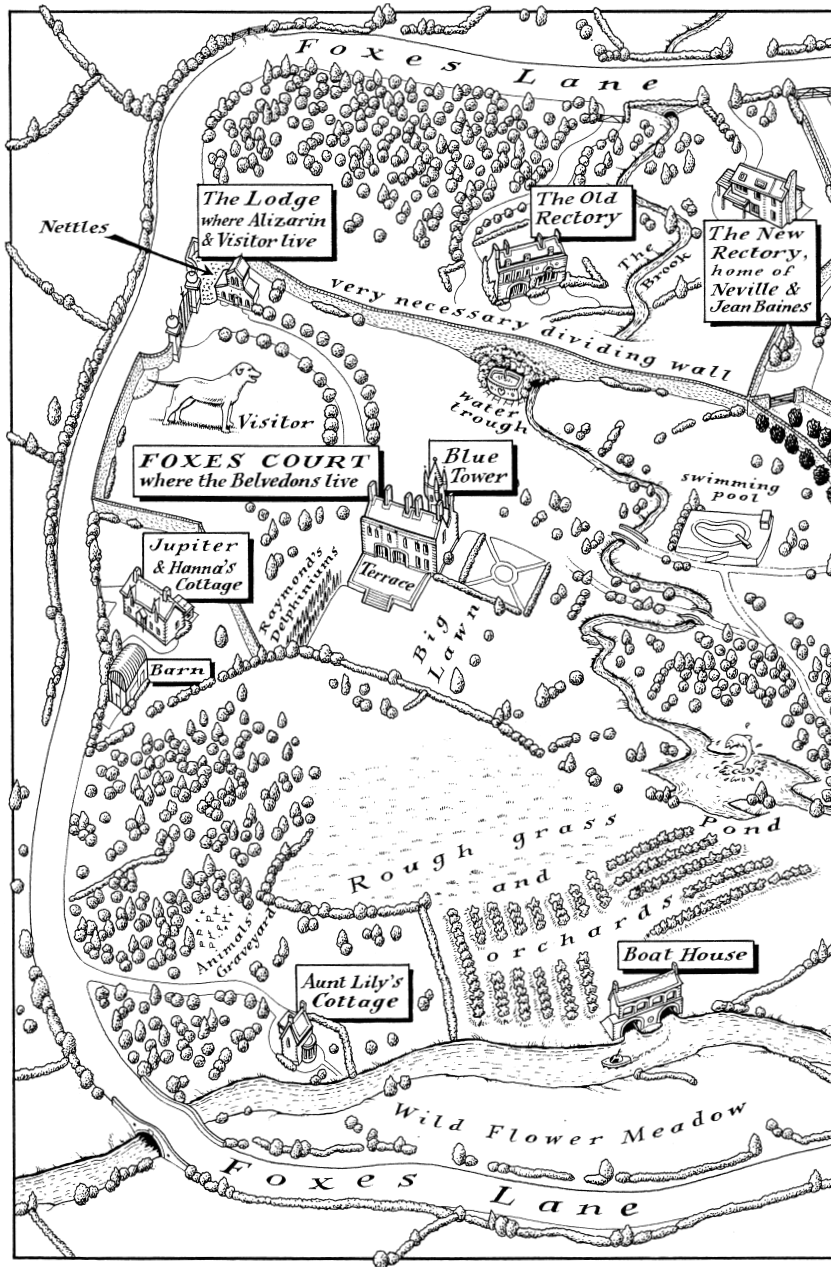
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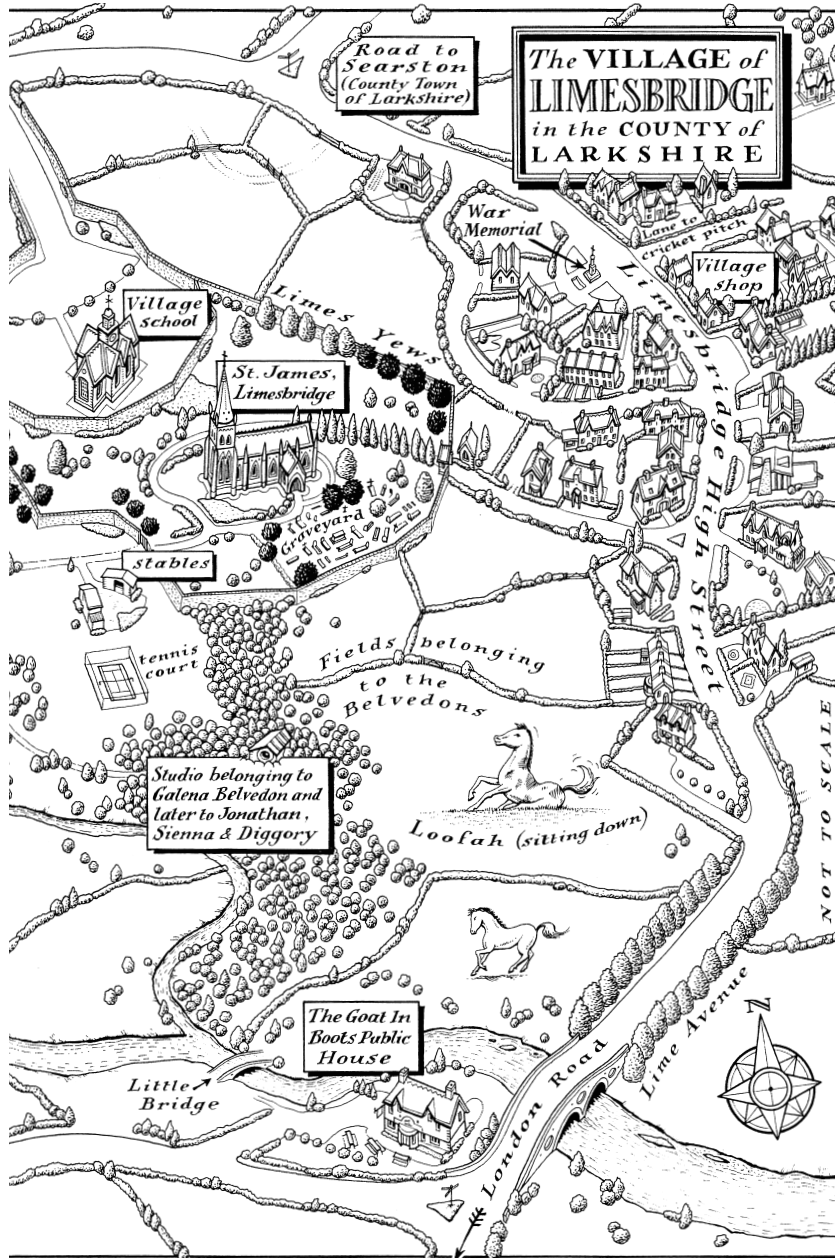
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To Mark Barty-King, a hero in every way,
with huge love and gratitude





THE LEGEND OF PANDORA'S BOX

There are many variations on the legend of Pandora but I have used the one that begins with a heroic mortal called Prometheus boldly storming Mount Olympus, the home of the Gods. As if on an SAS mission, he stole fire, which had hitherto been the preserve of the Gods. This audacity outraged Jupiter, their King, not least because he feared that mortals might now have a means of overthrowing him.

As retribution, he therefore instructed his Gods and Goddesses to create the most beautiful mortal ever seen: a woman called Pandora, which means 'all-gifted'. Jupiter then ordered his messenger, Mercury, to deliver this exquisite creature to the door of Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. A susceptible young man, Epimetheus ignored his brother's warning not to accept any presents from the Gods and promptly asked the lovely Pandora to marry him. His only condition was that she should never open the oak chest in the corner of the room.

The newly married Pandora, however, was overwhelmed with curiosity, and one day when Epimetheus was out hunting she yielded to temptation and opened the chest. Immediately all the evils and diseases of the world, which had been trapped inside, flew out. After

viciously stinging Pandora and a returning Epimetheus, they flew off, contaminating the earth with a biological storm and bringing dreadful pain and misfortune to the human race.

Pandora and Epimetheus were still weeping and writhing in agony when they heard tapping on the inside of the oak chest and out stepped a radiant, angelically smiling fairy.

‘My name is Hope,’ she told them, ‘and I have come to bring comfort and to relieve the suffering of you and all mankind.’

CAST OF CHARACTERS

GENERAL ALDRIDGE	Lord-Lieutenant of Larkshire – so boring he’s known locally as ‘General Anaesthetic’.
COLIN CASEY ANDREWS	England’s greatest painter, according to Casey Andrews. A Belvedon Gallery artist with exalted ideas of his own genius and sexual prowess. Long-term lover of Galena Borochova.
ZACHARY ANSTEIG	Zac the Wanderer. An American journalist of Austro-Jewish extraction, whose tigerish beauty and air of suppressed violence in no way conjure up cheery images of <i>The Sound of Music</i> .
NEVILLE BAINES	Vicar of St James, Limesbridge, predictably known as ‘Neville-on-Sundays’.
JEAN BAINES	His very tiresome, ecologically correct wife, known as ‘Green Jean’.

RAYMOND BELVEDON	An extremely successful art-dealer, owner of the Belvedon Gallery in Cork Street.
JUPITER BELVEDON	Raymond's machiavellian eldest son, who, after Cambridge, joins him in the gallery.
HANNA BELVEDON	Jupiter's blonde Junoesque wife, a very gifted painter of flowers.
ALIZARIN BELVEDON	Raymond's second son, a genius tormented by a social conscience. Produces vast tortured canvasses no-one wants to buy.
JONATHAN BELVEDON	Raymond's colossally glamorous younger son. A genius as yet unhampered by any conscience at all.
SIENNA BELVEDON	Raymond's elder daughter. A truculent, talented wild child.
DICKY BELVEDON	Raymond's youngest son – an artful dodger.
DORA BELVEDON	Raymond's younger daughter and Dicky's horse-mad twin sister.
JOAN BIDEFORD	A Belvedon Gallery artist and splendid bruiser with a fondness for her own sex. Unenthusiastically married to Colin Casey Andrews.

MICKY BLAKE	The Curator of the Commotion Exhibition at the Greychurch Museum in New York.
GALENA BOROCHOVA	An inspired and extremely volatile Czech painter with a fondness for sex.
SAMPSON BRUNNING	A brilliant QC, famous for keeping the Belvedon family out of gaol.
RUPERT CAMPBELL-BLACK	<i>Enfant terrible</i> of British showjumping, as beautiful as he is bloody-minded, later leading owner-trainer who dabbles idly in paintings.
TAGGIE CAMPBELL-BLACK	His adored second wife – an angel.
ADRIAN CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert's younger brother – a cool and successful gallery owner in New York.
XAVIER CAMPBELL-BLACK	Rupert and Taggie's adopted Colombian son.
COLONEL IAN CARTWRIGHT	Former commanding officer of a tank regiment, managing director of a small but very profitable engineering company in West Yorkshire.
PATIENCE CARTWRIGHT	His loyal wife – a trooper.
EMERALD CARTWRIGHT	Their elder adopted daughter, a sculptor as ravishingly pretty as she is hopelessly overindulged.

SOPHY CARTWRIGHT	Patience and Ian's younger adopted daughter, a teacher of splendid proportions and great charm.
NAOMI COHEN	Zachary Ansteig's lawyer, as ambitious as she is bright and beautiful.
KEVIN COLEY	A perfectly awful petfood billionaire, Chairman of Doggie Dins. A collector of art as an investment and sponsor of the British Portrait Awards.
ENID COLEY	His overweight, overbearing wife.
EDDIE	Raymond Belvedon's packer.
MR JUSTICE CARADOC WILLOUGHBY EVANS	A high court judge.
FIONA	Raymond Belvedon's gallery assistant, a glamorous well-bred half-wit.
DETECTIVE INSPECTOR GABLECROSS	A super sleuth.
SI GREENBRIDGE	A mega-rich American arms-dealer and a serious collector of pictures.
GINNY GREENBRIDGE	Si's trophy wife, a former Miss New Jersey.
LILY HAMILTON	Raymond Belvedon's older sister.
DAME HERMIONE HAREFIELD	World-famous diva, seriously tiresome, brings out the Crippen in all.

HARRIET	A radiant henna-haired reporter from <i>Oo-ah!</i> magazine.
ABDUL KARAMAGI	An amorous Saudi with a penchant for saucy pictures.
KEITHIE	Somerford Keynes's boyfriend, an exquisite piece of rough trade and sometime burglar.
SOMERFORD KEYNES	A malevolent gay art critic, known as the 'Poisoned Pansy'.
ESTHER KNIGHT	Raymond Belvedon's comely cleaner.
MINSKY KRASKOV	An unnerving Russian Mafia hood, who uses art as collateral to raise money for dodgy deals.
JEAN-JACQUES LE BRUN	A very great French painter.
NATACHA	A glamorous member of Sotheby's Client Advisory Department.
SIR MERVYN NEWTON	A rather self-regarding dry-cleaning millionaire.
LADY NEWTON	His grander wife, given to gardening and Pekineses.
ROSEMARY NEWTON	Their daughter – an absolute brick.
PASCAL	An American interior designer.
PATTI	Another glamorous member of Sotheby's Client Advisory Department.

GERALDINE PAXTON	A networking nympho, a mover and shaker in the art world.
PEREGRINE	Sampson Brunning's junior.
GORDON PRITCHARD	A very exalted specialist.
CHRIS PROUDLOVE	The genial, indefatigable press officer at Sotheby's.
DAVID PULBOROUGH	A Cambridge undergraduate employed to coach the Belvedon children in the vac. Later a highly successful art-dealer with his own gallery, the Pulborough.
BARNEY PULBOROUGH	David's son – a seriously dodgy slug in a Savile Row suit.
ROBENS	Raymond Belvedon's gardener/chauffeur whose wandering eye is overlooked because of his green fingers.
MRS ROBENS	His long-suffering wife. Raymond Belvedon's cook and housekeeper – a treasure.
ANTHEA ROOKHOPE	A very tempting temp, who becomes permanent at the Belvedon Gallery in all senses of the word.
TAMZIN	Raymond's gallery assistant in 1999 – the 'Dimbo'.
TRAFFORD	Jonathan Belvedon's unspeakably scrofulous best friend and painter-in-crime. A Young British Artist.

SLANEY WATTS

A glamorous New Yorker and
PRO of the Greychurch
Museum.

HENRY WYNDHAM

The charismatic Chairman of
Sotheby's.

ZELDA

An American art student.

ZOE

David Pulborough's subtly
understated assistant.

THE ANIMALS

BADGER	Rupert Campbell-Black's black Labrador.
THE BRIGADIER	Lily Hamilton's white cat.
CHOIRBOY	Trafford's Newfoundland puppy, as intent on destruction as his master.
DIGGORY	Jonathan Belvedon's sharp-toothed Jack Russell.
GRENVILLE	Raymond Belvedon's brindle greyhound.
LOOFAH	Dora Belvedon's delinquent skewbald pony.
MAUD	Raymond Belvedon's blue greyhound.
SHADRACH, MESHACH AND ABEDNEGO	Rosemary Pulborough's marmalade cats.
SHRIMPY	Galena Borochova's Jack Russell.
VISITOR	Alizarin Belvedon's yellow Labrador, great-great-grandson of Rupert Campbell-Black's Badger. Socialite and ballroom dancer.

PROLOGUE

In the early hours of 24 August 1944, Raymond Belvedon, a recently commissioned young subaltern in the Larkshire Light Infantry, waited in a poplar copse for first light, when he was to lead an attack on the village of Bonfleuve, which lay below. His platoon, who had been fiercely fighting their way through Normandy since D-Day and who had had little sleep for three days, dozed fitfully around him.

Raymond was too tense to sleep and, with a torch, was reading Tennyson in a lichen-green leather-bound volume given him by his older brother, Viridian, for his twentieth birthday back in May. The volume, which he kept in the breast pocket of his battledress, had saved his life a few days before, when it had deflected a sniper's bullet headed for his heart.

In the flyleaf, Raymond had stuck a photograph of his family. His mother, father and elder sister, Lily, a beautiful, much-sought-after Wren, were grouped round Viridian, always the centre of attention, and here laughing on a garden bench with Hereward, the wire-haired terrier, bristling on his knee.

In the background rose Foxes Court, the glorious golden-stoned family home in Larkshire, reminding Raymond of the pat of tennis balls, chocolate cake under the walnut tree, Beethoven drifting out of the

study window, his father grumbling to visitors that the garden had gone over, his mother sending him inside to fetch her a cardigan because the evenings were drawing in – all those clichés of country-house life, which seem so precious in wartime.

And the starry nights were so quiet in Larkshire. By contrast, here, as though time had stopped on 5 November, a monstrous everlasting firework party crashed, banged, thundered, roared and exploded all around him, with flashing and flickerings constantly lighting the sky until his brain seemed to crumple like a kicked-in compo tin.

It was already hot and close, but Raymond couldn't stop shivering. It wasn't just from butterflies over the task ahead. The day before yesterday, during a lull in the fighting, he had been scribbling a letter to Viridian, who was serving with the regiment in Italy, about the deflection of the sniper's bullet.

'Your birthday present stood me in further stead', he had written, when he became aware of the wireless operator receiving a signal, which he had immediately taken to the adjutant.

Raymond had noticed them talking gravely, then wondered if he had failed the company in some way, as the adjutant approached him with a solemn face.

But instead he had said, 'Awfully sorry, Raymond. Got some bad news.'

Viridian had been killed near Cassino. As yet there were no details.

The worst part was imagining the village postmistress pedalling up the drive with the fatal telegram and not being able to ring home to comfort his parents.

For how would they ever recover from the loss of such a golden boy? Viridian, as the elder son, would have inherited Foxes Court and its fifty acres and the family business, the art gallery in Cork Street, both of which he would have run effortlessly and with such panache.

Now the task would fall to Raymond, who had long

dreamt of a gentle academic career, writing books on art, and who felt less equipped to run a business than Hereward the dog. Raymond had been so sorry for poor shy, stammering George VI, having to step into the polished brogues of the glamorous, adored Edward VIII. Now he was in the same position.

And how would he himself survive without Viridian, whom he had loved so dearly, and who had been so fearless and certain of life, always shielding Raymond from bigger boys, never embarrassed to have a much younger brother hanging around?

Raymond glanced back at his volume of Tennyson, and at Viridian's strong, sunburnt, laughing face in the photograph, and quoted despairingly: "Death has made his darkness beautiful with thee."

Oh lucky, lucky death. Raymond had thought he was bearing up awfully well until last night, when he had stumbled on a poor lone cow on the verge of a road. Refusing to abandon her dead calf, whose back legs had been blown off, un milked for several days, she was bellowing in pain and desperation. Having been brought up with animals, Raymond settled down to milk her. Only as he finished did he realize her reddy-brown flank, where his dark head had rested, was soaked with tears.

His platoon, most of whom had been recruited from Larkshire or next-door Gloucestershire and who knew Viridian and his parents, had been so kind. They hadn't said much, but Private Treays, who was the son of the local blacksmith, had given him a four-leaf clover, Private Turner had handed over the remains of a bottle of Calvados, and Lance-Corporal Formby, who had the charm of the devil, had wheedled three brown eggs out of a nearby French farmer, which had been scrambled for Raymond's supper last night.

On the other hand, the anguish of losing Viridian had made Raymond even more aware of his responsibility to bring his men safely through the coming action.

Beside him Private Treays had fallen asleep, head on his knapsack. From the faint pink glow in the east, rose doré mixed with a touch of raw sienna, Raymond could see the boy's thin face darkened with stubble, long lashes drooping over purple shadows, a half-eaten apple browning in his hand. Raymond wished he had pastels and paper.

'You must draw for at least a quarter of an hour a day,' his father was always telling him. 'Then you'll realize how bloody difficult it is for the artists.'

Once again Raymond wondered how he would ever live up to Viridian, who had so charmed both artists and collectors. He had never felt more lonely nor more inadequate.

Unknown to Raymond, however, his platoon sergeant, John 'Spider' Webster, whose face was so round and red it could have risen instead of the sun, was keeping an eye on him. Raymond's fortitude worried Sergeant Webster. The lad pushed himself too hard, constantly living in Viridian's shadow, worrying he wouldn't be up to the job. In fact he was first rate, brave as a lion and loved by officers and men alike. Some of those young subalterns were such berks, but Raymond was so kind, so modest, so unaware of his good looks, so outwardly unflappable. Spider had only once seen the boy lose his temper – when Private Turner, mistaking a big black hound silhouetted in a doorway for a ferocious guard dog, had shot it dead.

Raymond glanced at his watch, and shoved Tennyson back into his breast pocket. Nearly time to attack; he had better wake the others. The fields, heavy with dew, gleamed like sheets of silver in the half light; a slight breeze bent the corn. Beyond the village on the far side of a little river, rising out of the mist, he could see the grey pointed turrets of the château, which was rumoured to be occupied by a Nazi gauleiter, one of Goering's favourites.

Just before five a.m., his platoon moved off. Raymond's task was to attack on the right, advancing stealthily through orchards and back gardens. The distant chatter of Spandaus suggested that the other platoons had already made contact. There was no time to lose.

"Into the jaws of Death, Into the mouth of Hell," muttered Raymond. He had always worried he wouldn't be able to kill the enemy, but with Viridian gone, he had no compunction and was soon shooting everything in his path in a blind fury.

Hearing shells exploding and the chilling swish of rockets, which indicated both the Artillery and the RAF were pitching in, Raymond battled his way choking through a smoke-filled café out into the high street, which had been reduced to rubble. Passing a little girl sobbing over a dead kitten, he gathered her up, shoving her into the arms of an old woman, also weeping in a doorway, and ran on.

By midday, after ferocious fighting, the village was in British hands. Germans had been winkled out of every other building. In a barn near the river, the other platoons had cornered forty prisoners. As they approached with their hands above their heads, Raymond was struck by how young they were and how old they looked; their hair prematurely grey with dust from the rubble, their faces seamed with despair and exhaustion like a defeated boat-race crew.

A delighted Lance-Corporal Formby, for whom needles leapt out of haystacks, had discovered a bottle of schnapps in an abandoned German staff car and gave Raymond a swig. A highly satisfied Company Commander was conferring with Spider Webster, his red face now blackened with smoke. Spider put a hand on Raymond's shoulder: 'You did very well there, sir.'

Delighted but embarrassed by such praise, Raymond quickly asked if everyone had been accounted for.

'I'm afraid Private Treays bought it, sir. Corporal

Turner was hurt, but only a flesh wound, thank God. The rest of us got through.'

Noticing Raymond's face working and his sudden pallor beneath the grime, Spider pointed to the château across the river, parts of which were now ablaze after a direct hit.

Disappointingly, however, no Nazi gauleiter had emerged.

'The bird seems to have flown,' observed the Company Commander. 'Just check if there's anyone inside, could you, Raymond?'

Numbly remembering how often Private Treays's father had shod his pony when he was a little boy, Raymond pushed open the rusty gates of the château and ran across a shaggy yellowing lawn. Kicking in a door, he wandered into a deserted drawing room where he found a cigar stubbed out in a Sèvres plate, with a three-quarters-drunk bottle of Calvados beside it, and some exquisite Louis-Quatorze furniture.

He was about to empty several bullets into Hitler's portrait over the fireplace, when his heart stopped at the beauty of a painting hanging on the right-hand wall. Drawing closer, he realized the subject was Pandora's Box. Pretty Pandora, in her sky-blue dress, and her rather insipid husband were writhing from the stings of the world's evils, newly released from a highly polished oak chest. To their left, the clearly defined Seven Deadly Sins were lumbering out of a side door, grumbling like drunks evicted from the pub. To the right, through a window, shone the full moon, bathing in light the iridescent rainbow-clad figure of Hope. She was so lovely, so serene, so radiant with promise of another world, compared with the bloody carnage and loss around Raymond.

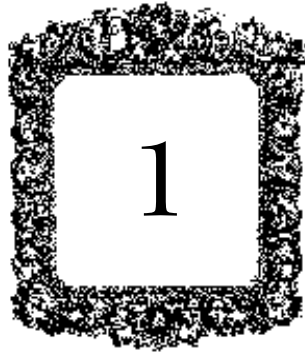
The painting, particularly of the oak chest, was so wonderful, the colours so glowing, the faces so vivid, that Raymond, having been brought up with pictures, suspected it could be a Raphael. Drawing closer, he

noticed a Latin tag, 'Malum infra latet', painted in gold letters along the bottom of the picture, meaning 'Trouble lies below'.

Trouble was also breaking out above as crashing beams and the warning shouts of his comrades brought him back to earth. He couldn't leave Pandora to burn, or fall back into the hands of the Nazis, who had after all just murdered Viridian and Private Treays, and only a philistine would hang a Raphael over a radiator.

Draining the Calvados, Raymond whipped out his knife and cut the picture out of its frame as his father had taught him. It was small, only twenty-two inches by eighteen, and easy to roll up, picture-side outwards, so as not to crack the paint. Glancing round for something in which to hide it, Raymond found a German First World War shell case holding fire-irons – the ideal solution and souvenir.

As the building collapsed, Raymond escaped into the sunlight.





1961

Raymond succeeded beyond everyone's wildest dreams. After the excitement of liberating Europe and a brief stint at Cambridge, he found equal thrills in transforming the respectable but slightly sleepy family gallery, the Belvedon in Cork Street, into one of the most successful in London.

To begin with, he worked all hours to blot out the horror of Viridian's death, but gradually he began to enjoy himself, developing a distinctly buccaneering attitude to art. Draconian export laws he felt deserved to be broken. Nor should one question too closely where a beautiful picture came from. Many a masterpiece was soon being smuggled abroad in the false bottom of his briefcase or brought home in the hold of the boat in which he took holidays each summer. Winter saw him with a permanent ski tan acquired while depositing illegal currency in the gallery's Swiss bank account.

Back in London, collectors fainted when given the occasional peep at the Old Masters stored in the Belvedon vaults. Raymond knew where to find a treasure and where to place it. Each time he was invited to stay in some great house, he left a less faded square on the damask wallpaper, having gently convinced his

hostess that this was the optimum time to part with the Velásquez.

As the gallery's success increased, so did Raymond's eligibility. Invitations poured in for dances, but as Raymond circled the ballrooms of the Hyde Park Hotel and Claridge's, fluttering the hearts of the debs and their mothers, he made sure he got his name in the address book of the fathers: aristocrats who might want to flog a Gainsborough to pay for the season, *nouveau riche* businessmen who needed guidance on adorning the walls of their big new houses.

Raymond was such a charming chap, so unsnooty, he could be relied on to act as an advisor and to sell you something really good when it came along – even if sadly he showed no signs of marrying your daughter.

Only in the same area had Raymond disappointed his parents. At nearly thirty-seven, he had still failed to marry and produce an heir. Raymond's mother had a weak chest and his father, who was champing to retire permanently to the house in Provence, was threatening to hand Foxes Court, the main family home, over to Raymond's elder sister and her husband, who was thinking of leaving the diplomatic service, if Raymond didn't get a move on. But Raymond was a romantic. He could no more marry a woman he didn't love than exhibit an artist whose work he didn't admire.

Raymond, who had a flair for anticipating changes in taste, had specialized not only in Old Masters and Pre-Raphaelites, which were beginning to rise in value, but also living artists. Two of the latter were a married couple in their thirties: Colin Casey Andrews and Joan Bideford. Casey Andrews's huge part-abstract landscapes of the Cornish coast were already selling well and in early May 1961, Joan had just completed such a successful debut show at the Belvedon that she had felt justified in throwing a party to celebrate.

She chose a beautiful Saturday evening – Viridian's

birthday, in fact – Viridian the virile, who would have produced half a dozen heirs by now, had he not been blown to bits leading his men at Monte Cassino without even a grave on which to put flowers.

Having taken down Joan Bideford's exhibition on the Friday before her party, Raymond and Eddie, his packer, had spent hours hanging the paintings of Raymond's latest discovery, a Frenchman called Etienne de Montigny, for the private view on Monday. Was it deliberately to eradicate the memory of Viridian's death that, at two o'clock in the morning, a sleepless Raymond had wandered down from the flat above the gallery and, deciding the pictures looked irredeemably garish and vulgar, had summoned Eddie the packer from the warmth of his girlfriend's bed in Battersea to repaint the stark white walls behind them?

Against a background of two coats of Prussian blue emulsion, the pictures looked sensational, like lit-up liners in a night-dark sea. Nor had Eddie minded labouring all night and through Saturday. At seven shillings an hour, he could take his girlfriend out on the toot this evening, and sleep it off tomorrow.

And Raymond was such a lovely bloke to work for, even if he did have mad notions and was picky about pictures being hung a millimetre too far to the left. He was so appreciative. He never talked down, and the tales he'd told Eddie about the Gods and Goddesses as they rehung the paintings would make your hair curl.

'That nymph being poked by that bull, Eddie, is actually the wife of the French Minister of Agriculture.'

Having showered upstairs and emerged beautiful as the evening star in his dinner jacket, Raymond had been distracted by a small oil of a languid youth admiring his white naked reflection in a pond.

'Exquisite,' he murmured.

'He'll get sunburn if he don't put on his shirt, and you're going to be late for that party,' chided Eddie,

taking a pale pink rose from the vase on the reception desk and slotting it into Raymond's buttonhole. 'I'll lock up. Don't let Joan and Casey Andrews bully you. Invitation said bring a bottle.'

'Oh hell.'

'Here, take the Jack Daniel's that Yank brought you.'

'Thanks, Eddie.' Raymond gazed round happily. 'That blue's made all the difference. I can't thank you enough. See you Monday.'

As he emerged from the white-fronted eighteenth-century terrace house, with the dark blue Belvedon Gallery sign swaying in the warm breeze, the prostitutes who plied their trade along Cork Street wolf-whistled.

'Who's the lovely toff?' shouted a handsome blonde.

A pretty brunette started singing a pop song called 'Wooden Heart', imploring Raymond not to break hers.

Raymond laughed and danced a few steps with her before coiling his long length into his bottle-green E-Type. The girls were his friends, whom he often sketched and invited into the gallery on cold nights for a glass of brandy. Last Christmas they had clubbed together and given him a bottle of Armagnac.

As he drove towards Hampstead, he found the sudden heatwave had brought out good-looking couples, laughing outside pubs or wandering hand in hand along pavements strewn with pink and white blossom. Knowing she'd be desolate remembering Viridian, he'd rung his mother earlier.

'You're such a dear, Raymond,' her voice had trembled, 'you'd make such a wonderful husband.'

In the spring, the not-so-young man's fancy, reflected Raymond heavily, turns to thoughts of love.

He felt as though he'd been imprisoned in the gallery for so long he'd missed the spring. The creamy-white hawthorns were turning brown in the parks, the chestnut candles already over. But as he passed houses garlanded in cobalt-violet wisteria and breathed in a heady scent of rainsoaked lilac, it was impossible not to

feel optimistic. He had sold a Reynolds to the National Gallery and a fine Zoffany to a Canadian collector, and Joan Bideford's nudes had gone so well that the big bumpy freckled nose of her far more famous husband was thoroughly out of joint.

Casey, as he was usually known, and Joan were such a repulsive couple: greedy, egotistical, sexually predatory, insanely jealous of one another and other artists, that, as an escape route, Raymond had arranged to dine at nine o'clock back in Mayfair with a rich collector and some of his friends – hence the dinner jacket. Later he would take them in wine-jolly strip-club mood back to the gallery for large drinks and a preview of Etienne de Montigny's erotic pictures.



2

Arriving at Joan and Casey's red-brick Victorian house, Raymond tripped over bicycles and a CND placard in the hall. At a recent demo, Joan had been arrested for socking a policeman. It was rumoured that during a subsequent stint in Holloway, she had developed a taste for her own sex.

Judging by the uproar, the party had been going on for several hours. People were crammed into a double-roomed studio with big sash windows opening onto the Heath. Lights like striped snowballs had just been turned on. Even on their walls Joan and Casey slugged it out. The only paintings on view were Joan's nudes and Casey's lowering seascapes, bright yellow cliffs over Antwerp-blue seas.

Raymond had forgotten the party was fancy dress. He could hardly see the paint-stained floorboards for Whistler's Mothers, florid Rembrandt self-portraits, Bardots, John F. Kennedys and Macmillans with drooping moustaches and winged grey hair. A famously drunken sculptor was causing howls of mirth because he'd arrived as Margot Fonteyn complete with white tulle tutu and ballet shoes but had refused to shave off his beard or wear tights over his hairy legs.

Raymond was desperate for a decent drink before he tackled the crowd, but the common denominator of the bottles lined up on the sideboard beside sweating

cheese and greying pâté was their cheapness and nastiness. Some still had raffle tickets attached. Clinging to his bottle of Jack Daniel's, Raymond searched for a glass, but his hostess saw him first.

'Raymond Belvedon!' she bellowed. 'Have you come as a waiter, or are you pushing off somewhere else as per usual?'

Everyone swung round because they associated Raymond's name with the gallery's success. Then they stayed looking because of his height and beauty and the warmth of his smile, which was belied by the wistfulness in his big turned-down manganese-blue eyes.

As a jury had recently decided *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not obscene, Joan Bideford had dressed as Mellors the gamekeeper in breeches, lace-up boots and a tweed checked cut-away jacket with a fox fur slung over her shoulders. The fox's eyes were marginally more glassy than hers.

On a plate, like some instrument of torture, she was brandishing a half-grapefruit bristling with cocktail sticks threaded with cubes of cheese and pineapple. Raymond could never look at her without thinking of Tennyson's poem 'The Revenge', and Sir Richard Grenville's wounded sailors: 'Men of Bideford in Devon, And we laid them on the ballast down below.'

Raymond had no desire to lay Joan anywhere. Her big handsome face was carmine with drink. He decided against kissing her jutting oblong jaw.

'Just dropped in to congratulate you,' he said. 'Exhibition went awfully well.'

'Sold any more since yesterday?' demanded Joan. 'No? Well, my monthly cheque didn't arrive this morning either.'

And I've just bust a gut flogging fourteen of your pictures, you avaricious bitch, thought Raymond, who had kindly paid her a retainer to live on while she produced enough canvasses for an exhibition. But it was no time to argue, Joan weighed more than he did and

her beady bloodshot eyes had lighted on the Jack Daniel's.

'Casey and I like bourbon, don't waste it on these gannets.' Grabbing the bottle, she shoved it behind an African mask.

Fortunately she was diverted by the arrival of Somerford Keynes, the *Daily Post* art critic, who'd come as Oscar Wilde and who was nicknamed the Poisoned Pansy because of his lethal reviews.

'Somerford,' howled Joan, 'did you bring a carbon of your piece?'

Raymond had managed to find a teacup and was just raiding the Jack Daniel's bottle when he was accosted by two pretty girls who thought it hilarious that they'd both rolled up as Lady Chatterley. Recognizing them as the entwined nudes in Joan's paintings, Raymond thought how much more attractive artists' models looked with their clothes on.

'Hello, handsome,' giggled the first. 'We're not going to find any decent John Thomas here, and none of us are safe from Joan or Casey. Want to come to another party?'

'You'd have much more fun with us,' added the second.

'What a pity, I've got to go out to dinner,' sighed Raymond.

'We know who you are,' they chorused. 'Will you tell your other artists we're very good models? Casey and Joan are so tight.'

Then they went scarlet, because towering over them, resplendent as Neptune in a slipping loincloth, with sea horses and seaweed painted all over his mighty torso and massive thighs, was Casey Andrews.

'Dance with you young women later,' he boomed, whacking them on the bottom with his trident. 'Now push off.'

With his jutting red-bearded jaw almost meeting his

huge bumpy nose, his angry little eyes and vigorous russet curls, Casey looked more like Raphael's drawing of Hercules wrestling with the Nemean lion than Neptune. But he was just as capable of causing storms.

It was strange, reflected Raymond, how the picture of Pandora, which had turned out to be by Raphael and which now hung at the top of the house at Foxes Court, influenced his judgement of people. Casey Andrews was guilty of at least six of the Deadly Sins: pride, wrath, envy, avarice, lust and certainly greed, as he devoured a huge Stilton sandwich washed down with red wine from a pint mug. Casey also felt it was his right to seduce every woman, and their privilege to capitulate. Raymond had nightmare visions of having to represent thousands of odious Casey Andrews offspring when he was a doddering old dealer.

Like Joan, Casey immediately got on to money. Had Raymond sold any pictures, had he heard from Rome and if not why not, and what about an American exhibition?

'An American car company's interested in that oil of St Mawes,' countered Raymond and, when Casey looked bootfaced: 'They'd like two more for the boardroom.'

But, as usual, Casey wasn't happy with the price. Commercial concerns should pay twice as much.

'Andras Kalman's invited me to lunch,' he said bullishly.

'You'll enjoy it.' Raymond just managed to control his anger. 'Andras is a charmer, and runs a great gallery.'

Casey stormed off.

Nearby two art critics dressed as Roman senators were admiring Joan's grapefruit hedgehog, which she'd abandoned on a sofa.

'I didn't know Bideford was tackling sculpture,' said one. 'That piece is very fine.'

Raymond suppressed a smile. He was so kind and courteous that the moment Casey abandoned him, the

crowd moved in: artists who wanted to show him their work; collectors who wanted free advice or jobs in the gallery for their daughters; critics who wanted praise for a review. Casey returned for another row and, finding Raymond surrounded, shoved off again.

'I can't think how you endure those two,' said a soft lisping voice.

It was the Poisoned Pansy, Somerford Keynes. Everything about Somerford seemed to flop downwards: his straight sandy locks from an Oscar Wilde middle parting, his droopy blond moustache concealing a large flapping upper lip, even his bow tie wilted in the heat. But he had knowing eyes, as if he were aware of secrets Raymond didn't want divulged. Somerford's taste for working-class louts was equalled only by his desire to be the darling of society hostesses, among whom he did not list Joan Bideford.

'Thank you for giving Joan such a good review,' murmured Raymond.

'If I hadn't been devoted to you, dear boy, I'd have annihilated her; so crude those lardlike bodies, I've perjured myself invoking the name of Gauguin.'

'Stop, you're driving me crazy,' sang the record player.

A large tabby cat was thoughtfully licking the sardine pâté.

'Can you chaps shove through to the next room?' ordered Joan.

'Got to go,' said Raymond, meekly shuffling a few feet forward.

'I'm meeting Francis Bacon at Muriel's later,' murmured Somerford, 'why not join us after dinner?'

Raymond felt overwhelmed with tiredness, nor did he want to be sucked into Somerford's underworld.

'I don't seem to have been to bed for days,' he apologized. 'Going to crash out the moment dinner's over.'

But as he glanced briefly into the second room his exhaustion fell away, for lounging against the piano,

dressed as a pirate, was the sexiest boy he had ever seen. He was about five foot nine, with straight dark hair hanging in a thick fringe and tied back by a black ribbon. His shoulders were broadened by the horizontal stripes of a matelot T-shirt, his hips narrowed by dark blue trousers tucked into shiny black boots. His face was dominated by long slanting sloe-dark eyes above very high cheekbones, with a black moustache and line of beard emphasizing a big sulky red mouth.

But it was the provocative thrust of his body and the disdainful lift of his head that made him so attractive, as if he were going to leap onto the deck of Sir Richard Grenville's *Revenge*, cutlass hissing, and slay every man alive.

Oh dear, dear God, marvelled Raymond.

Then, as the pirate reached back for his glass on the window, the striped T-shirt tightened against a high breast and jutting nipple and Raymond realized that he was a girl, that her moustache and beard were of smudged cork and that several men who normally showed no interest in women were circling her as though she were covered in sexual aniseed.

"A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold black eyes", muttered Raymond, but this time there was no Viridian's Tennyson in his breast pocket to shield his heart from Cupid's arrow.

'More like one of the waiters at La Popote,' mocked Somerford. 'Even I wouldn't mind giving her a jolly roger.'

'Who is she?' asked Raymond.

'Galena Borochova, playgirl of the Mid-European world, defected last year from Czechoslovakia, rumoured to have slept with half the secret police in the process, drinks too much to forget, been causing havoc in Paris. Casey and Joan are equally besotted and fighting over her. Rumoured to be a good painter. Needs a dealer' – Somerford looked slyly at a spell-bound Raymond – 'to take her under his wing.'

The pirate was now emptying a bottle of Riesling out of the window, shouting, 'Nothing good ever came out of Yugoslavia,' and helping herself to more red.

'That's wasteful, Galena, sweetie.' Appearing from behind, Joan Bideford lifted up the girl's T-shirt and grabbed her breasts with huge red paint-stained hands.

'Go away, Joan.' Galena's voice was deep and husky like a cello played all its life in smoky nightclubs. 'Just bugger off.'

Then, when Joan didn't, Galena calmly stubbed out her cigarette on a groping finger.

'You bitch,' howled Joan. Tugging down Galena's T-shirt, she kissed her bare shoulder. 'But I love you for it.'

Galena shrugged then went berserk as a man dressed as Picasso tried to take her photograph. Screaming in Slovak, she snatched his camera, hurling it against the wall with a sickening crunch.

By the time Raymond had fought his way over, Casey Andrews had seen off the opposition and, armed with a refilled pint of red and another Stilton sandwich, his red beard smeared with butter and crumbs, was trying to persuade Galena to dance.

Closer up, Raymond discovered she looked older, perhaps thirty. He was also reassured to see a few grey hairs in her black fringe, and lines round the arrogant mouth.

'Who is this?' she demanded, then, examining Raymond's face, 'Ve have met before.'

'We certainly haven't.'

'I am never wrong.'

'Where are you from?'

'Bohemia.'

Raymond smiled. 'That figures.'

'Who are you?' she asked impatiently.

'Raymond Belvedon,' snapped Casey, 'Joan and I show at his gallery.'

'You make a stunning pirate,' stammered Raymond. God, how wet could one get?

'I come from country viz no coast line,' said Galena. 'In England ven you feel trapped, you can run and run until you reach the sea. In Czechoslovakia you end up in Austria, East Germany or Poland. Now I am here, I can be pirate.'

Noticing a bacon-and-egg pie being carried past, she speared a big triangle with her cutlass.

Raymond couldn't take his eyes off her huge sulky mouth. He longed to stand up the rich collectors and whisk her off to Annabel's, but she probably wouldn't get in without a tie.

'Somerford likened my work to Gauguin,' Joan was telling everyone. She and most of the men in the room were preparing to launch another attack on Galena, who was now arguing with Casey, wolfing bacon-and-egg pie, waving her cigarette around, coughing, taking gulps of red wine and all the time keeping her narrowed, appraising eyes on Raymond.

Finally the drunken sculptor dressed as Margot Fonteyn could bear it no longer and pirouetted up to Galena, arms, hairy legs and mug of Spanish Burgundy going everywhere. An outraged Casey shoved him away. Margot Fonteyn swayed and fell backwards on Joan's grapefruit hedgehog with a bellow of pain.

'Lucky thing,' grumbled Somerford, 'to have so many pricks in one go.'

'Poor chap.' Raymond struggled not to laugh.

Galena had no such reserve. Unrestrained guffaws seemed to bubble up from inside her like lava.

'You said you were going ages ago, Raymond,' said Casey pointedly.

'I am.'

'You must see my vork.' Grabbing Casey's sketch-book, left on the piano to be looked at, Galena tore off half a page.

‘I’ve drawn on that,’ bellowed Casey.
‘My signature will be more worth than all your drawing one day,’ taunted Galena.
Scribbling down her name, a street which Raymond had never heard of and a Battersea telephone number, she shoved the piece of paper into his breast pocket, then removed the pink rose from his buttonhole.
‘In Czechoslovakia, it is unlucky to give people even number of flowers. One rose is OK.’
As Casey was about to run him through with his trident, Raymond fled.