

mixer. Pull a lever and this skip would run on ropes up to the containers. Then you were set for a run.

When the going was heavy it was a three-man job, but mainly we managed it between us; held it easy, which meant we could talk. The trick was to tickle his imagination and get him talking. It was hard going at first. I've seen me go a whole afternoon and fail to stir him into action, which is to say into speech. I think he lived through his memories. Times you'd shout at him and he'd turn slowly with eyes like glass. But after a time I got to know the buttons.

One was riding. I remember finding out how it was through a riding school, trotting by one fine Saturday morning. We knocked off to watch them lollop by on their frisky little nags, young girls with smooth faces and velvet caps, boys with leather leggings and proud, watchful eyes. 'There's class for you,' I said.

'Not class,' he said. 'Except to you. To others they're like lice. And to those above, nonentities: nowts for short. There's no such thing as class. There's only caste. Caste is what you belong to and what the suckers take in – that's you.'

'Everybody knows there's different classes,' I said.

'Everybody knows,' he snorted. 'And that makes it so. But it's just imagination. You and your pals could get together and make a caste and get as much satisfaction as the nobs among yourselves. Know that. Gang of Teddy Boys or whatever they call them now are no different from the nobs that keep themselves – and the cushy jobs – to themselves. All you need is a bit imagination.'

'Listen, George,' I said, 'how did you work this one out?'

'In the trenches Ah reckon. Not in words. Only vague. And know why? There was only life an' death and it clashed the imagination outa ye. Didn't matter a bugger who led ye over No Man's Land so long as he brought ye back. Class didn't work there – or caste. Some of them class officers were hopeless and helpless and we'd pray for them to get a bullet before we got ours. Best men were them that kept alive; class didn't stop a shell or a bullet, so it's all imagination.'

'But everybody believes it,' I said.

'Makes no odds. The quality had to believe it; that's why so many good men went down. To maintain the idea of caste. They still pull the wool over our eyes – otherwise the entire caper would crash. Doesn't make any difference if they pull it over their own. See?'

I didn't understand this and went off at another tack. 'What was that you said the other week – about being dead?'

'Oh, that!'

'Well, come on, tell us, George.'

'It's simple. When they blew up Hill 60, they blew me up. Nothin' worthwhile left. Proof's in the fact that Ah'm here. By every rights Ah should have been a corpse a dozen times. But there was nothing to kill. What's wrong with the name Flack?' he suddenly asked.

'It's a funny name.'

'Funny?'

'Well, outa the ordinary.'

'Whose isn't? Take yours; Arthur Haggerston. Just think about it.' I did. 'There now, is that less funny than Flack?'

'Funnier.'

'That's it. Every name's a laugh, if ye stop to think. They're relics. Don't go with trousers and braces and television sets. So why the hell bother?'

I told him I hadn't the slightest idea.

'That's right, you don't know. But one name's all right an' you laugh at another – like Flack.'

'Ah never laughed, honest, George.'

'No, not you. But others have.'

'Who for instance?'

'Plenty. You know men have changed their names 'cos they couldn't stand the laughing that went on every time their backs was turned?'

'Nobody down our way ever did that.'

'Well, it's happened. In fact a nephew of mine did that. Came

back dead. Wife died in the 'flu epidemic. Sister of mine had a promising lad. Ah wasn't on the beer in them days. Saved all me spare cash. When the day came Ah helped her to send him to a university. Well, he went and it was worse than goin' to the war. He came back a few times but it would have been better if he'd stayed away. Ah used to stay out when he was at home – that's how Ah got on to the beer.'

'He must have been a snob.'

'He lost himself, that's the trouble, and blamed it on the name. Reckon some of the smart lads must have given him hell. So one day after he'd left the university he walked in and said he'd given himself another name.'

'And then what?'

'Nothing. We went on living and he went on living and nobody knew the difference, except that we saw less and less of him.'

'What trade did he go in for?'

'Teacher,' said George. 'Still teaching somewhere around the city. Seen him do a mickey across the road many a time. Mind you, he never did that to his mother. But it gave her a smack all the same.'

'But ...' I began to query.

'Know what you're goin' to say – if his mother was me sister his name wouldn't be Flack. Well, you're wrong. She was me sister, but his name was Flack ... maybe that had something to do with it.'

We looked at each other for a while. 'Okay, let's get this batch off,' he finally said. 'You think it over. The most comic name there is can be a bloody sad name for somebody.'

We did the batch and all the time I was thinking that maybe this had a funnier twist than he'd dreamt of – was Carruthers-Smith the Flack that changed his name? If so I could understand why he ran that day. As soon as we had a minute – 'What did he change his name to, George?'

'You think you know him?'

'Could be.'

'Think Ah'm goin' to tell you that! Ye've got another think comin' ... he's due to that much protection.'

'Wouldn't be a chap called Carruthers-Smith?'

The glass was back in his eyes. 'You can try me till doomsday but Ah'm sayin' neither yes nor no,' he said.

After a while he said, 'What did you say it was?'

'Carruthers-Smith.'

'Well, he was bloody ambitious, but not so bloody ambitious as that,' he remarked. 'Anyway, there's more than one like him around.'

And this was all he would say. There was a time when I'd have enjoyed the thought of going back to the Dump and brushing up against old Carruthers-Smith to whisper: 'Howya, Flack?' Just to see him take a fit or maybe two. And maybe to make sure it was really him. But not now. I've seen enough of dead men of one kind and another and don't want to trouble them. Often wonder what it would feel like to change my name. Say to Tony Curtis. I reckon it would be like a prisoner on parole. It's bad enough running away from anything, let alone your name. Even Flack. Flack's all right. That character had too much imagination. Or too much to put up with.

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Meanwhile, the gang was getting organised. Full strength was about fifteen but you couldn't always count on a one hundred per cent turn-out and you could bet your bottom dollar that trouble always came when we were fewest. Not that we had much trouble for a start. One way and another both us and the Quaysiders had learned a lot from the encounter in the Regent.

From then on we kept strictly within our private preserves. Around the perimeter wasn't so very safe so you kept to the centre, and there was plenty there to keep you occupied. A bit boozing, limited because of the expense, pictures twice a week,