



It was just after midday and two men, one black, one white, were being taken through a courtyard to be hanged. As courtyards in prisons go it was large, and they had nearly a hundred yards to walk to reach the two separate scaffolds on which ropes, wet with rain from an earlier shower, dripped on to the trapdoors beneath.

Hands tied behind their backs, one five yards behind the other, the prisoners each had a guard on either side. Not to prevent escape, as such, but to control them in case the fear – which usually numbed the condemned – transformed into panic. They had approximately a hundred steps left to take in this life and a few more breaths than that. They had eaten the last meal, smiled for the last time; they would sleep no more: they would never wake up again. The black man was intensely alert. He looked at the warden's vegetable patch – Bibb lettuce, six purple tomato plants and three varieties of snap beans bursting with juiciness. Was he affronted by their insolence, knowing that the last thing he would taste now would be the taste of terror? Perhaps he saw nothing at all. The white man following behind seemed not calm but indifferent. He blinked only occasionally. Then he tripped – just a little – and recovered quickly.

'Mind yure step, Bechette,' said one of the guards. 'We gotta deliver you to the rope all crackerjack.'

The white prisoner turned his head slightly to one side and spoke for the first time that morning.

'My name isn't Bechette, I didn't have anything to do with this murder, I wasn't in the country when it happened.'

The older guard had heard many protestations of innocence – a few (a very few) turned out later to be true. Sometimes these performances were pretty convincing, but after so many years he thought he now could tell innocence from desperation. Of course, by the

time he was involved in taking these men to the gallows it made no difference what he believed. But Bechette's tone was one which he couldn't place. Such a detached observation made no sense on such a terrible morning.

Halfway now. From one of the few windows overlooking the execution site a convict started to sing, a good voice but almost as high-pitched as that of a young girl.

*Suummetiimes I feeeeeel like a feather in the air*

*Suummetyeeyimes I feeeeeela like a feeearther in the aaaair*

The voice dropped a surprisingly long way: *Lord, Lord, I know my time ain't long.*

Someone shouted:

'Shut yure pie-hole!'

But the voice sang on as the walk continued.

*Suummetiimes I feeeeeel like a muuutherless child*

*Suummetyeeyimes I feeeeeela like a muuuuuuutherless child.*

Bechette appeared not to hear the music at all. Despite, or perhaps because of the mournful beauty of the song, the black prisoner seemed only more agitated. But then he did something odd: he stepped aside to avoid treading in a puddle. At this a look of anguish crossed the face of his fellow prisoner, as if the simple act of a man wanting to avoid getting his feet wet had broken through the mask. He started to slow and the guards next to him tensed, moving closer to grab his arms.

'Easy now, Bechette. Let's do this quick, eh?'

Soon the first prisoner was at the foot of the first scaffold stairs. His guards were surprised to see the Hangman coming down the steps from the second scaffold with a deeply concerned look on his face. This was an agitated man, which in turn worried the guards, who looked to do this work in as routine a fashion as possible. But the Hangman ignored them and walked straight to the second set of guards as they headed for the second gallows.

‘Mr Bechette, is it?’

An ecstasy of hope from the bound man. Reprieve! Reprieve!

‘I must apologize to you, sir . . . ? *No apologies. No reprieve begins with an apology!*’ . . . but the inclement weather has caused the trapdoor on the white scaffold to jam. I’m afraid you must hang on the black scaffold. I regret this, but there’s nothing that can be done. But be assured, Mr Bechette, that you will not hang using a Negro rope or a Negro hood. You have my word as a gentleman.’

Honour satisfied, he turned and walked over to the black scaffold and started up the steps, calling out behind him, ‘Bring up the coloured prisoner in twenty seconds.’

‘Feel right sorry for you, Bechette,’ said the young guard. ‘Shit, bein’ innocent an’ all, looks like if you didn’t have bad luck you wouldn’t have no kinda luck at all.’ It was his first hanging and he was anxious to show that he wasn’t bothered.

‘Now you shut *yure* pie-hole,’ said the older guard. ‘And keep it shut.’ He turned to the second prisoner. ‘Just wait here, Chief.’

. . . *like mah soul is on fiire . . .*

By now the black prisoner was taking his last step on to the scaffold proper. His legs gave way, but the guards, experienced men, held him firm and eased him forward on to the trapdoor.

‘Please don’t let me fall.’

‘We won’t. It’ll be all right,’ said the older guard.

The Hangman, still not entirely over his exasperation at the morning’s impropriety, looked impatiently at the condemned man. ‘I can’t hang you, Cuffy, if ’n’ you won’t stand on your own two feet. Think of the trouble you’re causing. We all have our job to do – mine’s to hang you, yours to get hanged.’

. . . *I’m beeeaven bound . . .*

Perhaps shocked at being spoken to in such an odd way on such an occasion, the prisoner straightened his legs and took the weight of his body. The older guard put his hands into the small of his back and gave him a gentle shove to position him on the badly drawn white circle that marked the centre of the trapdoor. The executioner stepped forward and reached up to the noose. Bechette watched, unmoved, as the black man lowered his head, a reflex, to make it

easier for the noose to drop into place. His breaths came in quick gasps now, shallow and rasping.

‘Don’ hang me. I can’t die. I’m not ready to die. I don’ wanna die.’

The hood went over his head and muffled his words.

... *Haaave no freeends* ...

At the signal the two guards quickly moved back from the condemned man. The Hangman stepped off the trapdoor and over to the lever. The condemned man called out what sounded like ‘Clover’, the executioner pulled the lever, the trapdoor opened and the prisoner fell like a stone for just under six feet – then in a snap of an instant stopped dead, the top of his head projecting just above the gallows floor.

Then there was only silence as the man shivered slightly, as if in a cold wind. And that was that.

Bechette now had fewer than five steps to take in this world – yet his expression was set like a stone. The two guards barely had to touch the unresisting prisoner for him to be on to the trapdoor and the faded white circle at its centre. The Hangman stepped forward with the noose and went to place it around Bechette’s neck. At the last, Bechette shied away like a horse refusing to be haltered.

‘Sir, this is no way to behave. Let us be dignified at such a time.’ Again the Hangman tried to loop the rope around Bechette’s neck and again Bechette twisted his head away. The Hangman signalled to the guards, who moved in and tried to hold him still. Bechette bucked and strained, groaning with the irrepressible frenzy for life.

Appalled, the Hangman stood back from the struggle, ‘You are only making things worse for yourself.’ An arguable claim, no doubt, but true or not it had no effect on Bechette. ‘Grab him, for God’s sake!’ cried out the older guard to the Hangman. ‘Grab him!’ His attempt to do so instantly failed as Bechette wildly threw him off. But the effort unbalanced Bechette and he staggered back into the appalled Hangman.

Barely sane, Bechette thought he was being attacked by the Hangman and, without looking, turned and shoulder-charged him with all the power that might be expected of a man trying to escape

the embrace of Hell itself. The Hangman crashed into the wooden rail, hitting it with the great force of his excessive weight.

This caused the nails that held it in place to give way almost completely. On tiptoe, he waved his hands like some fleshy windmill, straining to keep his balance – but the nails renounced their twenty-year grip of the wood and with a great tearing sound launched the Hangman into the void. Half a dozen jailers scrambled on to the gallows and hauled Bechette to the floor, pinning him there.

Bound arm and knee, Bechette was taken back to his cell and heaved inside. It was just a little more than nine minutes since he'd left. For a few minutes, his body vibrated with the terror of this experience. And then he fell asleep.



# I

Despite the depth of his sleep, there was no rest for Bechette. He was woken by a presence in the cell, but when he tried to stand he was painfully jerked back by a chain looped around his waist.

‘Sorry about that. I thought it best to be cautious.’ The speaker was dressed in an immaculate white suit – silk and cashmere. His face was at once amused and friendly. ‘Quite the helter-skelter, this business, Mr . . . ?’ The man paused, watchful. Nothing. ‘Only I know it’s not Bechette . . . which, of course, is what you’ve been claiming all along.’ The prisoner gave away nothing; he did not flinch or seem relieved – which might be considered odd under the circumstances. ‘You see, all the fuss you caused up on the scaffold inspired the Federals to look into your case a little more carefully. I’m ashamed to say it didn’t need to be all that much more carefully. It only took a few hours to establish your innocence of the murder they’ – he gave a little grimace of contrition – ‘*we* . . . were going to hang you for.’

‘Apology accepted. I’ll be on my way.’

‘Unfortunately, there’s the matter of our late Hangman, Mr’ – he paused – ‘someone or other.’

‘He’s dead?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

A beat.

‘It was self-defence.’

‘I’m very much inclined to agree,’ said the man in white. ‘But it’s tricky.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘I can see why you might think so. From your prospective, it was self-defence.’

‘Fuck my *perspective* . . . it *was* self-defence.’

‘And yet Mr . . . whatever his name . . . was not in any sense attacking you. He was a legally convened officer of the court carrying out



his duty. A Hangman at the command of a properly constituted court of law is not committing an act of violence of the kind that can be legally defended against.'

Another pause.

'Who *are* you?'

'Louis Van Owen, fourth governor of the great estate of Texas. At your service.' A smile of a rather strange sort. 'Possibly.'

'If you're the governor, that means you can pardon me.'

'I can.'

'And will you?'

'Try to understand my position. Feelings are running high concerning poor . . . Mr Selo, that was the Hangman's name. The prison guards are unhappy at any suggestion that someone who kills an estate official in the act of carrying out their sworn duty should go unpunished. My position is . . . complicated.'

The prisoner stared back and took his time.

'So what can I do for you?' he said at last.

'I had a feeling you'd understand.' Governor Van Owen laughed, a pleasant sound. 'First of all, we need to be honest with one another. Unusually honest. This business is really all very extraordinary – so many unlikely chances all coming together at just the right moment. What are the odds? You condemned to death for a crime you didn't commit. Me not taking the slightest interest in just another hanging. I hadn't even heard of you until yesterday. Then the stunning drama on the scaffold – what a predicament! And lo and behold, not only do I now know who you are not, I miraculously discover who you *are*. What a run of bad luck you've had . . . quite the Calamity Jane.' He laughed, as if encouraging the man in front of him to enjoy the joke. 'How interesting life is!' He waited and so very much enjoyed the moment. 'Isn't that so, Mr Thomas Cale?'

## Thomas Cale [pron: ka.lɛ]

---

From the Wikipedia Albionis

Thomas Cale (b.769?; Modern Era b.1923?), also known as Vinegar Tom and the Sea-Green Undefeatable, has become the measure against which military leaders compare themselves, and military academies throughout the world teach his tactics.

Cale was raised by the military wing of the Redeemers at the Sanctuary, a training seminary for an extremist religious sect that believed they were called by God to destroy sinful humanity. Redeemer Altine Bosco (later Pope Bosco IV 782–784; ME 1937–9) believed Cale to be the promised Left Hand of God who would lead this apocalyptic slaughter. At the age of fifteen [citation needed] Cale escaped from the Redeemers and went to Memphis, where he was taken under the wing of the controversial politician and philosopher IdrisPukke. Eventually he became bodyguard to Arbell Materazzi – a largely ceremonial role. There were rumours of a sexual relationship between them, but the historian Aleixo de Menezes has shown conclusively that this is rooted in Redeemer *verum falsum* or ‘false truth’. Cale was recaptured by a Redeemer Army after they defeated the Materazzi at the Battle of Solsbury. Rehabilitated by Bosco, Cale led the Redeemer Seventh Army against the Laconics at Golan and inflicted the first recorded defeat upon them [citation needed], revealing himself, despite his age, to be a shrewd, ambitious and skilled military strategist.

Escaping for a second time to Switzerland, and reunited with IdrisPukke, he swiftly added political skills to his military talents. Nevertheless, his attempts to obtain a military position with the Axis powers, consisting of the Swiss, the Hanse and the Northern Hegemon, were a failure, largely because of his rivalry with the much better connected Conn Materazzi [citation needed]. After the near-annihilation of the Swiss at the hands of the Redeemers at the Battle of Bex he persuaded the now panic-stricken Axis to allow him to create a new peasant army. Using a range of ground-breaking tactics and technological advances, he brought about the collapse of the Redeemer armies in less than eighteen months, resulting in a notorious mass suicide at their military stronghold, the Sanctuary.

Subsequently, Cale disappeared for nearly two years, amid unsubstantiated claims of a mental breakdown. He re-emerged in 789 (ME 1942) leading the enslaved Helots in their insurrection against the notoriously brutal Laconics. Whether Cale was responsible for the massacre of the entire population of Laconia that ended the campaign or was simply unable to control the Helots is a matter of fierce debate. When the Axis powers moved against him in 783 (ME 1945) he spent the next ten years gradually taking control of the Four Quarters. In territories conquered by Cale he introduced complete reform of the legal systems, establishing elected juries and habeas corpus, free education and basic health services for the poor, property rights for married women and a civil service based on merit by means of anonymous exams. During this period he also invented the roundabout [\[citation needed\]](#).

He emancipated the Jews in ME 1949, despite widespread and violent opposition that led to the anti-Hebraic uprising the following year, which he ruthlessly suppressed at the cost of some 20,000 lives among the anti-Semites [\[citation needed\]](#). Eighteen months later he faced a Jewish and Eslamic uprising when he banned genital mutilation of both female and male babies. His suppression of the riots that followed was equally ferocious.

However, disaster struck when he became involved in the Boll Shevik Revolution of ME 1955 and was ousted from power in the Four Quarters. He managed to bring victory to the Boll Sheviks but was arrested by Stalovek, later to become notorious as ‘the greatest mass murderer’ in history. He was taken to the Special Object 110 prison in Vidnoye [\[citation needed\]](#), and various sources claim he was either executed there or that he escaped. Believing Cale still to be alive, the International Court of Rights at the Hanse has issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of Crimes against the Humanity committed during the anti-Hebraic insurgency, the White Terror, the Ten Years War and the Boll Shevik Revolution.

---

## See Also

- Materazzi Empire, Collapse of
- Redeemers, Atrocities of, Theology of, Collapse of
- Boll Shevik Revolution (disambiguation)
- Conn Materazzi, Execution of

## 2

If the collective memory of every tyrant who ever lived was lost from the history of mankind, their vices could be restored in every detail by a study of the life of Thomas Cale.

– Sir Water Radleigh

All things taken into consideration, Thomas Cale was very possibly the least worst tyrant who ever lived.

– Joennifer Harlow

Those of you unfamiliar with the name Thomas Cale – if there can be any – will wonder why this was such an extraordinary thing for the man in white to say to the wretch sitting in front of him in a Texas condemned cell. Consider if he had used the name Napoléyon, or Jehngis Cahn or Moa Tse Dung. It was the same. It was so preposterous that the man who was not Bechette snorted spontaneously as if physically unable to contain his contempt.

‘Are you off your head?’

Van Owen was not at all offended.

‘I hope not, for your sake. If you’re not the great man, then your usefulness to the only person who can save your life is not worth a bowl of homeopathic soup made from the shadow of a pigeon that has died of starvation.’ A pause. ‘Well?’

The man who was not Bechette seemed to relax a touch, as if there was a certain pleasure to be had from what he was about to say.

‘Whose throat do I have to cut?’

Van Owen smiled, pleased with himself.

‘I’m so glad we don’t have to plod, Mr Cale.’

‘How do you know I’m not lying to save my skin?’

‘The great unwashed, Mr Cale, may not recognize greatness in

a man, a noble bearing, that ineradicable power of command . . . ? He laughed, again a pleasant sound. ‘I’m afraid I knew it was you as soon as I looked through the opening in the cell door. I saw you eight years ago in Riga when I was part of the team from the United Estates negotiating a trade deal with the Hanse to stop them blocking our exports of chicken wings.’ He smiled at Cale as if he’d uncovered a treasure long searched for. ‘Why don’t we get you out of here, Mr Cale? That will instantly make the world seem like a brighter place.’

Two hours later Cale was heading towards what his dubious saviour called the Casa Amarillo, a few hours from the estate capital. ‘It’s a simple place, the yellow house – but all the better for it.’ Then, with a touch of mockery, ‘Just the right kind of spot to refresh one’s ragged soul.’

For the first hour of the journey Cale stared out miserably enough over the cotton fields of the Dallas Blacklands, full of former slaves scouting for pests: bollworm, flea hoppers, cut worm and spider mites. But then the cotton gave way to a long stretch of something like the uncut meadows of Vallambrosa he used to love and he stopped brooding and seemed to Van Owen almost bewitched by the rolling expanse of grasses and wild flowers.

‘Tell me their names,’ said Cale, like a man who expected to be obeyed. Van Owen was more curious than irritated by his tone. Odd that such a giant of power and destruction, this Khan of the Four Quarters, should be so moved by a wilderness of flowers.

‘That,’ he said, pointing, ‘is what we call in Dallas . . . purple paintbrush . . . beautyberry – the one that looks like purple holly. That’s . . . uh . . . firewheel, I think.’

‘What about that one there?’ said Cale, indicating a flower that looked like a flat-topped black bulrush, with bright orange petals hanging down below. Van Owen shifted awkwardly.

‘Not . . . quite sure.’

Cale stared. Van Owen gave in.

‘The locals call it Jezebel-in-a-skirt.’

‘What’s a Jezebel?’

‘A black woman. A sort of –’ He interrupted himself. ‘That’s brown-eyed Susan . . . and . . . uh . . .’ A bird, startled by the passing of the carriage, exploded out of its hiding-place in a pocket of brush-wood and shot away in a thrumming of wings and a two-tone whistle.

‘Gentleman Bob!’ called out a delighted Van Owen, and stuck his head out of the carriage window to watch the bird dip and whistle its way over the prairie. He pulled his head back in to discover a slight smile from Cale, the first time he’d seen any sign of happiness on the lined face. ‘Gentleman Bob,’ repeated Van Owen. ‘Bobwhite quail. Hunted them all the time as a boy. There used to be so many you could throw a stick at them and get your dinner. Prairie used to cover everything. Now there are more cotton rats than quail.’

‘You’re the governor – why don’t you do something about it?’

Van Owen shrugged. ‘Ain’t no money in Texas bluebonnet and scarlet sage.’

### 3

Besides exhaustion after a dreadful war with Spain, the reason that the South gave in to the demands of the North to free the slaves was that when it came to cotton, slaves were already becoming more trouble than they were worth. It took one slave ten hours to pick the seeds out of one pound of cotton lint so that something useful could be spun with it. Slaves could barely pay for themselves against the cost of buying, feeding, watering and putting a roof over their heads. However, a face-saving minor clause in the Slave Emancipation Act provided that with enough congressmen in support (an impossibly large number, it was thought) a petition could go to the Supreme Court to decide if any such vote was permitted by the Constitution. American slavery was to go the way of the serf and the eunuch.

And then forty years later some guiltless devil invented the cotton engine. A cotton engine could process ten thousand pounds of cotton in a single day and free up ten thousand Negroes to plant and tend and pick the white stuff and turn cotton from a waste of money to a means of printing it.

– Jubal Cartagena, *The Devil's Engine: Technology, Politics and the Re-emergence of Slavery* (Harvard Press)

‘*The cup that cheers but not inebriates?*’ said Van Owen.

Cale looked at him.

‘Tea, my dear fellow. Or something stronger?’

Cale very much wanted something stronger but knew to keep clear of drink when so much was at stake.

‘Tea is fine.’

Not for the first time in his life, Cale was struck by how many different worlds, the beautiful and the ugly, the pleasant and the

disgusting, the scintillating and the dull, whirled about each other cheek by jowl. Yesterday he was waiting to have his neck wrung at the end of a rope, today he was about to have a nice cup of tea.

‘So . . . what do you want from me?’

Van Owen looked benevolently at Cale.

‘Oh, don’t ask what you can do for me, Mr Cale, rather let’s consider what I can do for you.’

‘All right, what can you do for me?’

‘In this part of the world, I can easily pass for a sophisticated man. But the truth is I believe a considerable number of things that a truly cultured person of the Old World would consider trite. For example . . . that there is always someone worse off than you. In my hick sort of a way, I’ve always found that to be a comforting banality. Take you, Mr Cale . . . You could easily be saying to yourself that nothing could be worse than that hideous experience of standing on the gallows yesterday. But that really isn’t so. The Janes, for example, are prepared to pay \$150,000 for the pleasure of, according to their ambassador, wrapping you in a blanket soaked in pitch and setting fire to you like a match. As for what the Applewhites intend to do to you, it makes me feel ill just thinking about the first hour of your execution, let alone the twelve hours following. When the Federals arrested you for something that, for once, you hadn’t actually done, you were skulking in a woodshed paying \$100 a day for one plate of bog potatoes. You’re not just running at a slight discount, Mr Cale, you’re all washed up and rotting on the beach. There’s nowhere to run for the Left Hand of God.’

Van Owen beamed at Cale again. “‘Where Thomas Cale goes, a funeral surely follows,’ isn’t that what they say? So very many funerals, Thomas – not that I believe more than half the dreadful things they say about you.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Look, Mr Cale, I am about to tell you something that puts everything – my reputation, wealth, life itself, all of it – into your hands. You’ll understand why I hesitate.’

Here was a man fully aware that he was standing at an exact point in his life where everything that came next would be utterly different



from what went before. There's a reason why few of us can point to such a moment in our own lives – these moments burn. We're right to dread them the way a wild animal dreads fire.

'I want you to kill the Chancellor of the United Estates.'

It would be reasonable to expect that Cale's life – a life of pain, murder, madness, the rise and fall of empires, the death of kings, the theft of kingdoms, the birth of tyrannies – that all this would have made him immune to shock. Cale did not reply. I do not say he was astonished, amazed, aghast or stupefied because these words are not up to the task.

'John of Boston?'

'You know of another Chancellor?'

'*Why?*'

He was not in fact asking for an explanation of Van Owen's reason, let's be clear; he was expressing in a single word what a mystery it was to contemplate the assassination of not just a man of great power but the most adored; the handsomest, cleverest, most charming, most convincing, most able: John of Boston was the receptacle of all hopes, ambitions and desires for a New World of freedom, prosperity and justice, and from all kinds: the young, the old, the disaffected, the deprived, the progressive rich, the enslaved, the cynical, the pessimistic, the lost, the meek, the sick. He was the world's hero. What possible benefit could there be worth the risk? It was to throw yourself off a cliff in the hope that decisiveness and daring might oblige your body to sprout wings.

'My reasons are my own.'

'If you want me to kill him, I think I have to insist.'

'Really? Do you think I'd have asked such a thing if I thought you had even the slightest excuse to say no? I could ask you to climb Mount Sionai to kill God Himself and you'd not be in a position to refuse. I offer a way out: the remote Bermudas, warm and like paradise, they long for you.'

Another pause and a smile.

'Besides, there is every chance – *every* chance – you'll not be his executioner at all. You don't think I was just hoping you'd turn up? You're a coincidence – a very fortunate one. I've been planning this

for many months. There is someone who is ready, as we speak, to fire the first shot. Only if he fails – and I have every expectation he will not – would you need to strike. You are an insurance policy on which I expect never to make a claim. It was his life or the life of John of Boston. Faced with that choice, there was, of course, no real choice at all.’

‘You’re right,’ said Cale. ‘I’m sorry to say it doesn’t matter why.’

## The New-York Times.

Given that three of the five judges on the Supreme Court are owners of large cotton plantations, we await with no little trepidation the judgement on the Constitutional legality of holding a vote in Congress to re-enslave the black persons of this country. Who knows what evil to this Union may result if they choose to open this Pandora's box of wickedness?

## Virginian Extra.

Many in the North are well-meaning, decent people, but their newspapers and populist politicians have provided no news, but only lies and misinformation. They spread perverted portraits of Southern slavery, contemptible caricatures of Southern society, and cast harrowing calumnies upon the Southern character. It is to repair these lies and educate the misinformed in the North that this divisive issue has gone to that hallowed institution, the Supreme Court.

The next day Van Owen returned to Casa Amarillo with something long and thin wrapped in a blanket.

'It's a Carcano, double shot,' said Van Owen.

Cale picked up the weapon and gave it the kind of cool appraising once-over of someone at least knowledgeable in such devices, something he certainly wasn't. This was an oddity, given his role in bringing the first of such weapons to the battlefield twenty years before. But those were rudimentary one-shot devices useful only against massed ranks because they were so cumbersome to load and so inaccurate. The Carcano was not designed for anything so crude as killing human beings but only to hunt game, and then only by the fabulously wealthy. A Carcano cost the same as a small house in the fashionable part of a minor capital city.

‘It won’t be a problem,’ said Cale.

Later that afternoon he was taken near to the site in Dallas by Van Owen. He was given a key and instructions. Walking about two hundred yards, he came to a bushy copse behind which was a wooden compound in which tools were stored for use in the municipal park just back from the road along which John of Boston would be passing. It had been built there at Van Owen’s instructions and the paperwork lost so that no one in the Parks Department even knew it was there. It gave Cale excellent cover and a resting point for the Carcano which would make an accurate shot more likely.

He left the compound and spent twenty minutes wandering up and down the road along which John of Boston would approach, using his heel to cut a divot in the grass beside the road to mark the fifty yards from the compound.

Back at the Yellow House, Van Owen was less talkative than usual. Then:

‘Tonight, I’ll bring our’ – his humour now a little weary – ‘our third *musketeer* to meet you. He’ll stay here until John of Boston arrives.’ He made as if to continue, then stopped. But he could not keep quiet. ‘This isn’t just a murder, Mr Cale. John of Boston is moving too fast – far too fast – in the matter of the rights of the Negro. The South won’t have it. He’ll pitch this country into a civil war that will burn this great United Estates to the ground. I tried, God knows I did, to get him to compromise. This is one man’s death against the death of hundreds of thousands. Against the death of an entire nation. And the Negroes will come out of it as bad as ever they were. Or worse.

Cale looked as if he were about to say something considered.

‘I don’t care.’

Sighing, Van Owen chewed the tiniest morsel of cake in the distracted way you might expect of a man about to kill a king.

‘Before I forget – what name do you want to be known by?’

‘Savio,’ said Cale.

‘Does Mr Savio have a first name?’

‘Dominic.’

Dominic Savio was a pasty-faced stool pigeon from his days in the Sanctuary. Hopefully, he was long dead, but if by chance he was still

alive the thought that he might end up hanging from a scaffold without his genitals for a crime committed by Cale was a pleasing possibility.

‘His name’s Oswald Hidell.’ Nothing more. Then: ‘That’s his real name.’

‘Not very wise.’

‘It’s of central importance to Oswald that his act is done in his own name.’

‘He wants to be famous for this? What an extremely bad idea – for the two of us, I mean.’

‘Normally, discretion in an assassin would, I agree, be the very least of the qualities one would demand.’

‘But Oswald needs this act to be his and his alone. He wants to live in history, and at his trial he wants the chance – the only chance he’ll ever have – to address the world to explain his reasons for such a terrible act.’

‘He sounds like the last person you should be using. More to the point, he sounds like the last person I want my life to depend on.’

‘I understand. But consider my choices: people ready to kill for money or other rewards tend, by definition, not to follow a code of honour. No offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘Anyone truly competent and professional enough to understate the task would be foolish to do so. Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Most definitely.’

‘Well, that was my dilemma. To ask . . . ah . . . *qualified* people would be to invite certain refusal while handing over the power of life and death to the kind of people who would certainly use it against me if it suited them. So I waited for a suitable, as it were, professional candidate to present himself – but oddly enough he never did. Until I came across Oswald Hidell.’

Van Owen took another nibble at his cake. ‘Oswald’s name came up nearly a year ago during an investigation by the Federals into the attempted assassination of General Nixon.’ Van Owen paused for a reaction.

‘Never heard of him.’

‘Nixon was retired – a crackpot who saw conspiracies

every-where – usually ones organized by spook-loving Northern elites designed to destroy the virility of the South.’

‘By virility, I take it you mean slave ownership.’

Van Owen smiled. ‘It could certainly bear that interpretation, yes.’

‘Just a minute . . . you said *attempted* assassination.’

‘Yes,’ said Van Owen. ‘Oswald missed.’

‘Please go on,’ said Cale. ‘I can feel the noose tightening around my neck with every word.’

Van Owen seemed oddly relaxed. ‘I doubt anything as merciful as a rope would be involved. Yes, Oswald missed and, yes, that might seem to be a significant flaw in view of the importance he has for both of us. But there are . . . *mitigating* circumstances.’

‘Such as?’

‘An inadequate weapon, for one thing. Oswald is a good marksman – believe me, I’ve watched him shoot. But he only had access to a poor-quality hunting rifle – and it was a very difficult shot, nearly a hundred and twenty yards, at night, and in bad weather.’

Although not much of a shot himself, Cale knew good marksmen who would not have even considered making an attempt under such circumstances.

‘And the other thing you were talking about?’

‘Just bad luck. Very bad luck.’

This struck home more for Cale than it would for others: he very much believed in luck, particularly the bad kind.

‘Explain.’

‘Simple enough, really. Nixon dropped his head just as he fired.’

‘Says Oswald.’

‘Yes, he did say that – but so did Nixon. He confirmed that if he hadn’t dipped his head to blow on an inkblot, the bullet would have left his brains all over the wall. All things considered, it was a damned good shot. There was no time for a second.’

‘Why wasn’t this Oswald put on trial if he tried to kill someone important?’

‘He was handed over to an associate who knew I had an interest in persons of a particular kind – though not, of course, why. At any

rate, at first I thought Oswald was just a crackpot with a grudge.’ He looked at Cale. ‘Let me be clear: he *is* a crackpot with a grudge, but he’s also more than that.’

‘I don’t know whether to be worried that you’re a bit of a bishop yourself,’ said Cale.

‘Bishop?’

‘Bats in your belfry.’

‘The thought has crossed my mind that I’m insane. But I’m persuaded after much careful consideration that this is not the case. I know that I’m doing a terrible thing, but I also know very clearly why I’m doing it.’

‘And Oswald?’

‘His motives, on the other hand, are . . . a mixture of vanity and, surprisingly enough, genuine insight.’

‘You’ll understand, Governor, that all this requires an enormous amount of trust on my part.’

‘It does, doesn’t it? But it seems to me, on reflection, that your great experience of the wayward human mind could be invaluable in keeping him stable – something we both want . . . or should I say *need* . . . very much indeed, if we are to survive.’

Cale thought about all this for a minute or two. ‘Why did he want to kill Nixon?’

‘Nixon? The General argued that freeing the blacks was a shameful injustice – like most Southerners, he thought freedom for slaves was an attack on his freedom to own them.’

‘The contradiction didn’t occur to him?’

‘Do contradictions occur to anyone when their deepest interests are threatened? In my experience, people are a very emotional sort of animal. Even if they’re very clever, they use their cleverness to justify their desires rather than to guide them.’ Van Owen seemed happy to be conspiring with someone he regarded as an equally gifted student of human moves. ‘And not that many people are particularly clever, are they?’

‘But you’re an exception?’

Van Owen smiled.

‘Something I don’t understand,’ continued Cale.

‘Yes?’

‘Why did Oswald want to kill Nixon for trying to stop the blacks getting legal rights but now wants to kill John of Boston for trying to give them the same rights?’

‘I’ll bring him tomorrow and you can ask him yourself. But be careful. Question him gently, by all means, but don’t pin him down too much when he contradicts himself. Admire what you can admire, and tell him so – and if you can’t find anything, pretend. From time to time, between all the half-baked opinions – and my God, he’s a pedant – there’s an intelligence in there, real insight. But he’s all over the place, and he’s getting worse. That’s why I decided to bring him here to you. No balanced man is going to kill a king, not like John of Boston, but you’ve got to keep him level enough to go through with it.’

‘But not enough to make him have second thoughts.’

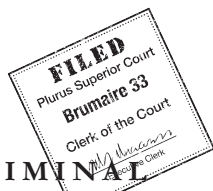
‘Second thoughts would be bad for both of us – but especially for you. Then it’d be Thomas Cale having to pull the trigger.’



A letter from prosecuting counsel of the Hanse International Criminal Court to the Lawyers of Thomas Cale (appointed in his absence) from the records of a case of alleged Crimes against the Humanity committed in the context of armed conflict by said Thomas Cale since ME 1942 (when the Maas-tricht Statute entered into force).



**THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL  
COURT OF THE HANSE 12TH  
Thermidor ME 1956**



Pre-Trial Chamber II

1. Judge Antoine Kes-Mbe Mindola, Presiding Judge
2. Judge Tomoko Arkane
3. Judge Rosario Salvat Aitalan



**BLANDINO & SMI STATUTORY  
DEFENCE ADVOCATES**

*My Dear Bolly*

*You have asked us to discover to you Thomas Cale's verbatim record of his early life. We do not believe that article 7 requires this of us. However, in a spirit of cooperation prior to his trial in his absence, we are prepared to provide this document in exchange for dinner at Quaglino's – it goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, at your expense.*

The following brief account was written by Thomas Cale at the age of 15 or 16 (his exact age is unknown) although we can't make the dates agree very precisely with other biographical dates we have. It was confiscated from the files of Sister Althea Wray, the Somatist founder of the 'talking therapy' for the insane, under whose care he was committed for six months. There is plausible evidence that he faked the allegedly severe nervous breakdown for which she was treating him in order to ensure better handling during a period of incarceration for unspecified crimes. Sorry to disappoint you if you were hoping for something that will help in Cale's defence – as usual, it's the familiar attempt to put himself in the best possible light, by claiming that the accusations against him are either lies put about by his enemies, or the vulgar exaggerations of popular myth, according to which he is 'held to be guilty of every crime ever committed, from the theft of chickens from a henhouse in Lower Arsewipe to the murder of the two princes in the tower', or that responsibility for the crimes rests with someone else entirely.

I can also confirm that we have no substantive knowledge of Thomas Cale's current whereabouts, despite your (rather hurtful, if I may say so) claims to the contrary. We've heard a rumour that in his attempt to get away from the very long arm of Stalovek (look what happened to Trotskii), he fled to the United Estates. Guilty as he may be of the many charges this office is bringing against him, there's absolutely bugger all evidence to support this claim. As a final gesture of goodwill – and in return for a bottle of Château Tropicier when we have dinner at Quag's (the '42, not the '51) – we have just had a more or less credible sighting of Cale nine months ago in Argentinier. On the other hand, we have also just received a not completely dismissible claim that he died fourteen months ago in the Comoros. As always, and in every respect, Cale remains a slippery bugger of matchless talent.

TRANSCRIPT OF THOMAS CALE'S OWN ACCOUNT OF HIS  
EARLY LIFE. Circa summer 783 or ME 2019

My parents sold me as an ickle boy to the Redeemers for sixpence. In the Sanctuary I was chosen out by Redeemer Bosco (later Pope Bosco) for special training. This meant even more beatings than usual, being taught to read (usually a sin), beatings, special access to the library of banned books, beatings, endless practice in war strategy with a room full of wooden models, more beatings, an extra three hours a day of fight training, more beatings. When I was fourteen or fifteen I caught that mad bastard Picarbo, the Lord of Discipline, cutting up a girl. I'd never seen a girl before. I had the sense to leave before he noticed I was there – but sadly for me I got an unaccustomed attack of pity and made the first really stupid decision of my life: I came back and killed him. One girl was dead, but there was another. Cut a long story short – I got her and Vague Henri and that bugger Kleist out of the Sanctuary and we made it to Memphis, all rich fuckers, uber criminales like Kitty the Hare, and everything for sale (and everyone). If you was a buyer, it was heaven. If you was the bought, hell. But after the Sanctuary – for me it was bliss.

Still, I tried to keep on the low-down in Memphis but got into a fight with rich kid Conn Materazzi and fucked him and his friends up pretty bad. Went to prison but was sprung by Chancellor Vipond and his dodgy half-brother IdrisPukke, who both realized the Redeemers were the coming threat and wanted to pay me to rat them up – which I would have been happy to do for nothing. Vipond squared the fight with Conn's uncle, Duke Materazzi. I got a sweet deal for me and Vague Henri and even that bastard Kleist. Then things went bendy. Vipond got wind of the Redeemers wanting the Duke's daughter,

Arbell Materazzi, dead on account of her being the prophesied 'Whore of Babylon'. Now I had entry to the library of banned books, and I never came across any Whore of Babylon or heard Bosco mention anything about her. But Vipond and her daddy were real spooked so I kept my gob shut. So now me and Vague Henri and Kleist were made bodyguards to Arbell – or God's gift to mankind, as she and everyone else saw it.

Even after I saved her life she still looked at me like I was something the cat dragged in – she thought I was just a killer. Completely true as this is, I'm not all bad when you get to know me.

But then she did get to know me. Then she couldn't get enough of me. And I believed it all – which just goes to show that you can be a very bad boy and still know fuck all about what's really going on. Still, in those days I thought women were a kind of angel. First time I saw Arbell naked it would have been no surprise if she'd had wings. I thought I'd gone to Heaven. And I did, in a way.

Still, I should've realized that Bosco was up to something with all that claptrap about Arbell being the Whore of Babylon (she was a lot more treacherous than any whore I ever came across). So then it all played out exactly as Bosco had planned – or even better. He gets control of the Materazzi empire and Arbell sells me to him in exchange for the life of her father and family. Now you may think you understand that she was in a difficult position – but I believed in her. She sold me to Bosco so that he could make an example of me by burning me alive in Peter's Square in the Sanctuary and take an entire day doing it. Think about that when you feel sorry for her. Think about the fact that I saved her life twice. Think about the fact that I proved that her deaf-and-dumb brother all of Memphis laughed at because he was the family idiot was really

as smart as a whip. Think about the fact that I saved that dritsek of a husband of hers and nearly lost my life doing it.

But then it turns out that Bosco didn't give a damn about me killing Picarbo. I was the one he wanted. And why did he go to the trouble and the risk of bringing down the most powerful war engine of the previous two hundred years? He told me, he told me with tears in his eyes, and all the while begging my forgiveness for all the pain he'd inflicted on me my whole life, that I wasn't a person at all – I, me, Thomas Cale was the wrath and disappointment of God made flesh. God was so angry at the failure of Humanity to be worthy of the gift of His only son who they'd hanged (very slowly) for offering mankind the gift of Salavation that He was finally going to solve the problem of His greatest mistake. All the beatings and training were for one thing: yours truly, the wrath of God, was supposed to wipe every last human being off the face of the earth, after which I would ascend into Heaven to be reunited with the rest of my godly self.

I knew Bosco was an evil bastard but I didn't know he was completely fucking crazy. It took me six months to escape but I did it in the end and made my way to Spanish Leeds. So now you know.

*Allegedly, after writing this, he left Sister Wray, for reasons that are unclear, and returned to Switzerland. After the Redeemers annihilated the Swiss army at Bex under the command of Conn Materazzi, Cale began his extraordinary climb to absolute military control of the armies opposing them (you have to hand it to him – history has seen nothing like it since Joanne of Arc).*

*I should also tell you that the Materazzi government-in-exile have written to us demanding that we include a charge of conspiracy and murder against Cale concerning the execution of Conn Materazzi. If you have any evidence concerning Cale's lack of involvement in Conn*

*Materazzi's execution, I'd be very happy to make this go away – God knows the list of indictments is too fucking long as it is.*

*See you at Quag's. The week of the 32nd is good for me.*

*Best to Debo.*

*Piggers*

After waking, Cale made himself three very strong cups of coffee and looked around the room for a distraction. All he could find was a copy of the *Navalon News*, subscription \$2 per year. There was no doubting that it was a local paper in that the front page was confined to what the readers regarded as of significance in the world: themselves. There was a paragraph presenting a petition to the Estate senate requesting that the name of Zaragoza province be formally changed to Willie County. There was a plea to avoid beating small children. Oddest of all to Cale was a report about a riot in Man Hattan caused by a row between patriotic working-class supporters of Mark Tweain, a native composer of low comic operas about murderers, juvenile delinquents and absurd adventures in time, and the upper-class Hispanophile admirers of the grand opera of the Old World with its kings and gods and high tragedy.

The Tweainians had turned up at the hoity-toity Ópera Bourbon and started throwing an assortment of objects at the singers during a production of Hidalgo's *Eumenides*. These objects ranged from rotten eggs to dead cats to bottles filled with a liquid made from dog-shit. The panicked authorities had called out the militia and twenty people had died in the street violence that followed. Cale was used to irrational acts of human cruelty, but to kill another human being over an *opera*?

Not having been there for above two weeks before his arrest, he was beginning to think that the United Estates was a strange sort of place. Given his experience of strangeness, this was a remarkable thought.

'I want to give the people of the United Estates something to think about.'

Oswald Hidell was, thought Cale, somewhere in his mid-twenties,

although he looked like a twelve-year-old whose body had grown to the size of a man but not developed any of the other signs of maturity. The tone of his announcement – for it was surely that – was self-aware, amused, but contradicted by the look in his eyes, which were suspicious and truculent: here was someone familiar with being dismissed. ‘And I don’t need someone to back me up.’

Cale smiled. Fifteen years in which he’d had to do as much politics as killing had schooled him well enough to disarm the rude and hostile.

‘That’s what both of us are very much hoping,’ said Cale pleasantly. ‘Mr Van Owen has told me of your skills as a marksman. They’re very much better than mine.’

Van Owen looked at Cale, somewhat surprised.

‘Then why do I need you?’ said Oswald.

‘Plan B is never better than Plan A, or it’d be Plan A. But it’s best to have one all the same.’

A chilly silence from Oswald. He looked at Van Owen.

‘I want it understood that, even if for some reason of bad luck I miss and you’re able to succeed,’ he said, the last with his voice dripping in doubtfulness, ‘then credit for firing that fatal shot still comes to me.’

Van Owen’s eyes relaxed very slightly.

‘I know I can speak for both myself and Mr Savio that unloading full responsibility for John of Boston’s death on to you is all that either of us dream of.’

Even Oswald had to smile at Van Owen’s honesty. ‘*Can* he speak for you, Mr Savio?’

‘Indeed he can, Mr Oswald. You can just call me Savio.’

‘Savio,’ said Oswald, as if weighing the man with the sound of his name.

‘I’ll show you to your room.’

‘I won’t share.’

‘Of course not.’

With that, and another doubtful look at Cale, he allowed himself to be ushered out of the room.

\*



Besides a grunt of acknowledgement at breakfast in the kitchen next morning, Oswald barely looked up. Then:

‘You a good shot?’

‘Fair,’ said Cale. ‘Not more.’

‘Well, we’ll see ’bout that later.’ Another few minutes of brooding, followed by: ‘Van Owen said you were in Rus a while. How come?’

‘I was working as a bodyguard for a delegate from the Hanse. He was negotiating various trade deals, so we moved about a lot.’ Over the years, Cale had needed to work on a great many lies in general and cover stories in particular. The best lies involved keeping as close to the truth as possible so that you were not caught out in the small ways. The bodyguard story was one of his best, in his opinion, because it gave him such a convincing way of explaining how he had moved among the great and good of the Boll Shevik Revolution (that is to say, the deranged and the murderous) without claiming any great status for himself of a kind that might arouse suspicion.

‘A bodyguard?’

‘Yes.’

Later, Oswald seemed restless and Cale suggested they play chess. At first, he rudely declined then changed his mind.

The game lasted an hour. By the time it became clear to Oswald that he was going to win, Cale watched him inflate like a balloon – but a balloon trying not to burst under the influence of the excess air generated by his triumph. Oswald was aware in some way that his reaction was too strong and that he must keep a grip on himself. He managed this by going back to his days in Rus and offering Cale the benefit of his insights. These pearls – Oswald clearly regarded them as such – were an odd mixture of him whining about not being given an important position in the government (he’d been given a job cleaning fish in a factory) and good sense:

‘There’s no system that can be entirely new. That’s where the Boll Sheviks went astray. They wanted to invent the wheel their own way. Even if it was square. You have to create a society that has the best of both worlds.’

\*

Late that afternoon Van Owen arrived with a second Carcano and some pistols. He took them through the woods to a clearing about twenty minutes from the house.

‘I can’t say you won’t be disturbed, but they’re familiar with guns around here. Just be friendly and let Oswald do the talking. They’ll remember your foreign accent,’ he said, looking at Cale.

Van Owen left them to it, and they spent twenty minutes checking the Carcanos, assembling and reassembling them. Then Oswald walked down to a tree about a hundred yards away and nailed a circle of material to the trunk about the size of a human head then a rectangle the size of the trunk of a man’s body just below.

‘I’ll be taking my shot from between fifty and seventy yards at most,’ said Cale. When he came back, Oswald looked at him a little too dismissively.

‘We used to say in the Marines: train hard, fight easy.’

*Cocky little shit*, thought Cale.

‘Go ahead,’ Oswald went on.

‘You’re the main man – don’t you want to go first?’

‘I’m not the one who needs to practise.’

Having torn the paper off the cartridge with his teeth, Cale poured the powder and the minié round into the muzzle, drew out the ram and in one graceful movement rammed powder and ball to the barrel breech and replaced the ramrod with great speed and deftness. Raising the weapon, he pulled back the lock, dropped the percussion cap in place, cocked, aimed, breathed in and then out slowly. He fired. And missed.

Oswald looked on thoughtfully. ‘Pity you can’t shoot as well as you can load.’

As it turned out, Oswald was a good teacher: clear, patient and knowledgeable. He wasn’t to know that Cale had been taught by the best marksmen money could buy and even then had not improved by much. Half an hour of practice got him back to the level of his previous mediocrity. Another thirty minutes and the quality of the Carcano helped to make him a little better than that.

That evening, flushed with success at having so comprehensively demonstrated his superiority in marksmanship over Cale, Oswald

was in a good mood and had decided to give the taken-down-a-peg-or-two interloper the benefit of his philosophy of life. As he talked, it became clearer that for Oswald the essential problem with both the United States and the Bolshevikism of the Rus was that neither world could meet all his needs. To him it seemed obvious that if the impulses of a small but defined group of people – the wealthy, the powerful of whatever stripe, presumably via a brick wall and a firing squad – were checked, then the natural state of things would reassert itself: decency, cooperation, a talent for partnership between people of every colour. Once there was justice and tolerance and a fair distribution of money, everything would be all right. Other than the firing squad, much of what he had to say would have had a great many perfectly nice people shaking their heads in agreement.

Cale had, of course, been one of the victimized and poor but had also been one of the rich and powerful. And what was so wrong, after all, with peace between men and women? What was the problem with wanting love, understanding, tolerance and justice for all? Cale examined his conscience to try to work out whether his frustration at listening to all these admirable ambitions was merely down to the fact that he had come to like money and power and didn't much like having lost them.

As Oswald talked on, moments of insight following on flights of the fanciful or the foolish, it became clear that he imagined for himself an important but entirely vague role in the New World: his part in bringing it about would be recognized by him becoming a very important person without any obligation to improve the standards of education, say, or the quality of steel, or the management of the health of the citizens. His skills would be well paid and much admired. He seemed sure that without taking responsibility for anything in particular he would be able to exercise a huge influence over the course of future events. At one point, smiling as if he knew something Cale could not possibly know, he went to his bedroom and came back with a book whose title he was careful to keep hidden.

'Listen to this,' he said with a cat-got-the-cream grin. *'In whatever arena of life one may meet the challenge of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices he faces if he follows his conscience – the loss of his friends, his fortune, his*

*contentment*? – Oswald paused then emphasized the conclusion of the sentence – ‘*even the esteem of his fellow men – each man must decide for himself the course he will follow.*’ He looked up with a sort of wildly excited, knowing triumph. Then he began to read again.

*A man does what he must – in spite of personal consequences, in spite of dangers and pressures – and in his ability to do so against conventional measures of virtue or goodness is the basis of all human morality. For true courage, a man must look into his soul.*

He shut the book and placed it with great ceremony on the table. ‘Do you know who wrote that?’

Fortunately, Cale did not, so he was not subject to any foolish temptation to upstage what was coming. ‘No idea,’ he said.

‘These lines,’ said Oswald softly, ‘were written by John of Boston.’

When Cale emerged from his room later, he could see Oswald was ready to go out.

‘A walk?’

‘I’m going into Navalon.’

‘Is that wise?’

‘Van Owen doesn’t own me, and you certainly don’t.’

Tricky, this.

‘Of course not. But given how close we are . . .’ He let this hang, vague but clear.

‘What?’ said Oswald, exasperated. ‘Do you think people can read my mind? *He looks like the kind of person who might kill a bigshot.* You don’t know Dallas, Savio, but I do.’ He laughed. ‘These people are as nosy as hell. They know we’re here – hiding just makes us look odder.’

He wasn’t going to be argued with.

‘Mind if I come?’

He could see that Oswald wanted to refuse, and also that he was wondering if it was wise to be so hostile.

‘Suit yourself.’

It was a two-mile walk, and most of it was in silence. When they got into the centre of Navalon, Oswald turned to him.

‘See you at the post house in an hour,’ he said, and walked off.

Cale watched him go, but in a few seconds a middle-aged man with a soapy smile emerged from a shop two doors down holding a tray with glasses filled with red wine and slices of oranges and decorated with a large sprig of green leaves.

‘Mint sangria, sir? A real taste of the old South.’

Much as he wanted to avoid a sales jabber, the little tears of water on the glasses spoke of the temptations of ice. He took the offered glass and tasted. Cold bliss!

The salesman watched as if nothing in life could ever give him so much pleasure as the sharing of the cooling scarlet beverage being enjoyed by the suspicious man on the boardwalk. But he welcomed suspicion – misgivings were the rocks upon which he had constructed ten thousand deals.

Next to the glasses on the tray was an immaculately folded napkin of white linen, starched and pure. The salesman waited until Cale had drunk half the glass then drew back the napkin to reveal a set of teeth.

‘Remarkable. No?’ he said, as if there could be no denying this was a long-lost work by the hand of Michel Angelo. ‘These, sir, are an example of the finest dentures available anywhere in the world. Notice I do not say “false” teeth, because there is nothing false about them. Here is no enamelled wood, no walrus, no ivory. These are real human teeth from the battlefields of the Old World. These are from Switzerland itself, where the young men who sacrificed themselves so nobly against the false religion of the wicked Redeemers were brought up on a diet rich in milk, cream and yogurt.’

‘Yoghurt,’ said Cale malevolently. ‘The “g” is hard.’ Why so aggravated about such a trivial mistake? Because it was certain, if the claim by the salesman was actually true, that the late owners of the teeth had been men who’d died under Cale’s command. The only exception would be if they had come from the disastrous Battle at Bex. That would be worse: at Bex, Cale had been obliged to burn the bridge over the River Glane in order to stop the Redeemers from following the fleeing Swiss soldiers and slaughtering every one of them. Unfortunately, this had involved stranding two thousand men on the opposite bank where they were murdered, and not quickly, by the frustrated

Redeemers. It was at Bex that the Redeemers broke with the universal practice of hanging anyone caught stealing teeth on the battlefield with the dual aim of helping to fund their war against the human race and sending a warning to any soldier who opposed them.

‘Now I can see you asking how I could possibly know these teeth are of the Caucasian purity I claim they are. This is, you’re thinking, a salesman’s folderol. I understand that . . . indeed, I couldn’t agree more that there are lies – damned lies – and the braggard docio of advertising. But I give you the word of a man whose word is his bond that none of the teeth in these prosthetic dentaduras is of coloured origin. Our teeth are free of even the slightest trace of the descendants of Ethiopia.’

‘You’re right,’ said Cale. What he was right about was unclear to the salesman.

‘I’m sorry . . .’

‘You’re right that I’m asking how you could possibly know.’

The salesman was relieved – he had sensed some awkwardness about the response of the man, but now all was clear.

‘I have been a purveyor of diamonds, sir, in my time, and may I say a skilled one . . . but not even the most skilled appraiser of gems requires the eye that’s needed to gauge a tooth that’s free of the taint of *negrura*. Of course, even the slow-witted could tell the tooth of a field Negro with a few months of careful tuition. But what about your *demi-meamelouc*? How many Southerners could tell someone who is one-thirty-secondth black if they were standing in front of them with a magnifying glass? Precious few. Now consider what it would take to appraise the tooth of such a person on its own, *sin otra pista*, and see the black shadow suffused within. It took me ten years of relentless study to spot the dim and distant frailty in the molar of a *passé blanc*.’

‘*Passé blanc*?’

‘One who passes as white – the child of a *demi-meamelouc* and a white man. One sixty-fourth black. Not even such a dilution is allowed. At the *Diesdedos Emporium* we know your mouth is a sacred place.’

\*

It took Cale about ten minutes to pick up Oswald and watch what he was up to. Nothing interesting; he mostly confined himself to looking in shop windows. Oswald was so wrapped up in his own world it was easy to keep an eye on him and take in the town of Navalon as well. According to the Welcome sign, Navalon had a population of 3,221 and was HOME OF THE BIGGEST ROSE BUSH IN THE WORLD! It was, rose bush aside, pretty much like a dozen other small Southern towns he had wandered through before his arrest for murder. Main Street was wide but made of dirt. Wagons of various kinds were parked carelessly, following only the rule that there should be space in the middle of the street just wide enough for a single wagon to pass. There were ruts big enough to rival El Gran Cañón. Side by side, there were the usual boarded wooden stores (GUITIEREZ CHINA, GLASS & QUEENSWARE) and a few small workshops (TEXAS CIGAR MANUFACTORY). Others were mysterious: COONEY – GROCERY-CUM-FANDANGO PARLOUR. Less mysterious but odd was a wide building with a long sign stretching above which stated AUCTION. But most of the writing on the sign had been painted out, leaving a long, white, empty space. Beneath it was a gathering of seven or eight men sitting and standing about in the way of such groups he'd seen in small towns everywhere from Batoor to Bumfuck. Ranging from their twenties to late forties, they appeared to have nothing to do but be idle, yet they stared out at the world as if they saw exactly what it was and weren't impressed. In this American incarnation they all wore hats; black bowlers for the elder; straw boaters for the young. The majority had their hands in their pockets and they glanced at the passing Cale in a style which spoke clearly: *I discard you*, they said. Hips were worn swaggeringly to one side. An older man was boasting to a younger:

“Lieutenant,” I say to him, “yure a damn son of a bitch and you can suck my ass.” ’

As he moved up the street and turned towards the post office, Cale looked back at them. Now, with the light striking the mostly blank sign at an oblique angle, he could just read the words that had been carelessly painted out: it had once read: AUCTION & NEGRO SALES.

Cale was waiting in the post house when Oswald turned up. As