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My Wife's Lovers

Dear Mr Duffus,

The news of your wife's death came as a peculiar kind of shock to me. It's not shocking that she should have died, of course, because she was old; not exceptionally so by today's standards of female longevity, it's true, but certainly of a very good age. So when I say (as I do) that the sort of shock I felt was one which contains an admixture of satisfaction, you will understand that I am not being spiteful: everyone has to die eventually, and it's not as if I can be glad that she was taken before her time, or anything as petty as that. More a feeling of *consummatum est*, perhaps – a 'well, that's finished at last'. Maybe that's what I'm feeling.

Why 'shock' at all, then? Is that really the *mot juste*?

Yes, I believe it is.

For when one has known someone as intimately as I knew your late wife, the realization that she has ceased, *tout court*, to exist, is always and in the strictest sense shocking. To think that those limbs once so straight and

proud, that glorious, light-bespangled hair, that skin so whitely delicate and silky on the inside of the thigh – I could go on, but this is neither the time nor the place. That they have ceased to be, in short. Even though, for a very long time now, no longer quite what they were, to say the least – now altogether gone. Not even food for worms, but actually incinerated. Yes, that is shocking. Notwithstanding that she was the instrument, willing or unwilling, of one's torment.

I hope, Mr Duffus, that she was never the instrument of yours. (I trust that doesn't sound patronizing.) Oh, I know that at one time, long ago, she must have been so. But I have heard that after she married you she did eventually 'settle down', as they say; domesticity and late motherhood did their usual sterling work to that effect. It does seem unlikely, I know, given her track record, but . . . anyway, *de mortuis*, etc. Now is not the time to rake up all that old muck. Such is far from my intention. I have no wish to say anything inappropriate to an occasion such as this.

Anyway, what I started off to say – my sympathy, Mr Duffus. Forgive an old fool for rambling on so irrelevantly. My deep and genuine sympathy. It would not do to forget that.

*Yours very sincerely,
An old friend of Kathleen's*

The old hand trembled slightly as he took the letter back from mine, but as he replaced it beneath the little figure of Sir William Younger which served as a paperweight on his desk he looked me straight in the eye. In

his own the hint of a tear glistened, and I looked down respectfully. A courageous old chap, I thought, succeeding beyond reasonable expectation in maintaining his dignity in what could only be described as trying circumstances.

‘I don’t suppose you can shed any light on that, Dr Halliday?’

I shook my head. ‘I’m afraid not, Mr Duffus. I’m as much in the dark as you – maybe even more so. Your late wife’s name was given to me as being, just possibly – and if I had identified her correctly from the information given me – the mysterious person with whom the subject of my book had been in some way . . . involved, during a crucial period of his youth. And who became, I suppose you could say, his Muse. That’s all, really. As to the background, the general ambience, I don’t know a great deal as yet, and as far as your wife’s possible rôle . . . ’

My voice trailed off. This was embarrassing for both of us.

Let me explain. I am a professional biographer, and I am writing the life of the Scottish novelist Alexander Buchanan, 1915–79. The great Scottish novelist, as some would have it. But that is not for myself to judge, I believe. Certainly he was an extraordinary one. I am not of the school of the ‘critical biographer’: I never make any attempt to analyse or evaluate the work. That is the job of others and I leave it to them. My part is to chronicle; and I pride myself on being a bit of a sleuth. Not that there weren’t a few academics who were furious that I had landed this job. I myself have no academic post, you see; I have always spurned all that. There

were those who cheekily suggested, I've been told, that I was chosen because I had insinuated myself into the good graces of the writer's widow. There are even some who accuse us of immoral relations; but I do not wish to trouble to give the lie to such calumnies – as someone else once said in a rather different context. Nathalie Buchanan was fifteen years the novelist's junior and about the same amount older than myself. I met her at a memorial event for Buchanan, actually, to mark the tenth anniversary of his death. An attractive and well preserved lady of French extraction. She stood up and made a speech. When a widow, on such an occasion, gets up and starts her piece with the words 'Sandy Buchanan was not an easy man . . .' you know that he must have been a very difficult man indeed. The concessive clauses followed, as one might expect, and filled up most of the remainder of the address, but the initial impression was indelible. I confess I was intrigued.

I introduced myself to Nathalie at the end of the official part of the evening and asked her a few questions, in a conversational manner appropriate to the occasion: probing, yes, but not too deeply or insistently, and I think with a good deal of tact. I believe she found me impressive, and perhaps even charming, but no more than that. I asked her whether any biography had yet been contracted; none had, though there had been approaches, to none of which Nathalie had felt inclined to respond positively. We agreed to meet the following week; and in a surprisingly short time an agreement had been reached. I think we both felt that we understood each other. I found Nathalie responsive and at the same time responsible – and, for her part, I believe she instinctively trusted me.

The initial spade-work was straightforward enough, and since I had Nathalie's full co-operation the early years of Buchanan's life fell to me easily. His ancestry, his childhood in Aberdeen, the son of a well-to-do lawyer, his distinguished schooldays – there was plenty of documentation for all of this, and many reminiscences of friends and contemporaries recorded during his lifetime and immediately after it, in the years since he had achieved a measure of fame. And for most aspects of his life in Edinburgh, from the time he went to the university until he left for the war, there was no lack of sources. These included a plentiful supply of people ready and even anxious to talk about him, even though very many of his own generation had regrettably now passed from the scene. There was only one objective in pursuit of which I unfailingly, and always swiftly, came up against a brick wall, and that was the very crux which for any biographer of Buchanan had to be pivotal – the identity of 'Rosalind'.

Readers of Buchanan will be aware that it is around this mysterious figure that his first major work, *First Class Single to Nowhere* (1949), revolves: circling and approaching, retreating and returning and never reaching. It is not a matter of the protagonist failing to attain her, though whether or in what sense he does attain her remains teasingly elusive; it is rather the reader who never 'reaches' Rosalind – that is the astonishing originality of the novel's concept. That is, Rosalind fails to appear in the narrative at all; in person, I mean. She is not directly portrayed, but her presence is summoned up by the conversations and passing references of others, through the skilful evocation of the ambient context, and

of course by the internal musings and the bizarre actions of the protagonist, Stoddart.

That Stoddart is transparently the young Buchanan is what makes the identification of Rosalind a biographical imperative. Buchanan wrote the work in Paris in the years following his war service in Burma, an experience of which he always refused to speak but which many critics consider the crucial submerged fact underlying all his later writing. His equal secretiveness about Rosalind and about Burma has led some to suggest that the former was never a real person at all, but instead symbolized or constellated something (exactly what, these critics are never able to say) which happened to him during the war years. But I do not believe that at all.

There was certainly at one time a handful of people to whom, in strictest secrecy, Buchanan had confided the identity of Rosalind, or who were otherwise aware of it. There is unimpeachable evidence of that. But unfortunately these people are all dead, nor did any of them pass the secret on during their lifetimes. It is a measure of the force of the novelist's personality, of the loyalty he inspired and also his judgment of character, that these beans were never spilt. And crucially, Buchanan had never confided this information to Nathalie. He had not married her until 1960, two decades after the events on which his novel was apparently based were over and done with, and he had never spoken to her about them. For her own part, she had naturally felt inhibited and quite uninclined to raise the matter; and probably, if the truth were known, preferred to remain in ignorance.

But after pursuing what seemed every possible lead in vain, getting absolutely nowhere and becoming quite

depressed at the prospect of publishing a biography with an aching void at its very centre, I quite unexpectedly had one of those breakthroughs which do sometimes come the way of those in my profession, and always gladden the heart. I happened to meet up, about another matter altogether, with a minor literary figure whom it had not even occurred to me to interview in this connection, as although he had known Buchanan as an admirer and something of an acolyte of the novelist, he was half a generation younger and not the sort whom a man like Buchanan would ever have dreamt of making a confidant. A sleek but ageing little man with a tired face and a tense jaw. But when I mentioned to him casually what I was working on, and the difficulty I had come up against, he was immediately on the alert. He glanced up at me quickly from his drink, an almost furtive look in his eye.

‘I can give you a name,’ he said.

Now this man needed something from me, which was why he had asked to meet me, and it was something, as it happened, that I didn’t feel over-inclined to give him. This was clearly his golden opportunity to wrest it from me, and the price was his information. But I wasn’t going to buy until I had good reason to suppose that the goods were genuine.

‘Tell me first of all how you know it,’ I responded.

‘I will. When I first came to Edinburgh as a student there was a folk club I used to go to. It was mostly students who went, but sometimes older folk would go along too. One time I was in the company of a couple of these older women, and they started talking about a girl who had enjoyed a certain notoriety in the years before the war. She had moved in a “bohemian set”, apparently – that sort

of thing. They spoke a bit about her, the things she got up to. Yes, they mentioned her name. I wasn't paying a great deal of attention – it didn't interest me, particularly. Then one of them said, "She was Sandy Buchanan's 'Rosalind', of course." "Really?" said the other. "I didn't know that." "Oh, there's no doubt about it." The second one asked what had become of her, and the first said, "Oh, she went away a long time ago." That was it. But I did take care to store the name in my memory.'

I looked at my informant shrewdly. The very sketchiness of the story seemed to me suggestive. The man had run it off without any appearance of hesitation or improvisation – and there were no little details put in for the sake of verisimilitude. In retrospect I am inclined to think that he knew all along that I was on the trail of Rosalind, and had realized his opportunity – that was why he had asked to meet up with me at this point. At any rate, I decided that I didn't have a great deal to risk except making a fool of myself, and I've often enough done that in the course of my career.

'So what was the name?'

My companion smiled knowingly, aware that he had got what he was after.

'The name', he said with teasing slowness, 'was Kathleen Caldwell.'

After that, things went for a time almost ridiculously easily. Although it is never explicitly stated in *First Class Single to Nowhere*, the probability seemed to be that 'Rosalind' had been a student around the same time as Stoddart. The university handbooks for the relevant years were the obvious starting-point, and they indeed revealed that a Kathleen Macpherson Caldwell had graduated in

modern languages in 1936, the year before Buchanan had graduated in history. I then turned to the annual register of graduates, and discovered that her home address (which remained constant until her marriage, though probably she spent little time there) was in Brechin. For the next few years her occupation is given as 'art student', which eventually gives way to 'art teacher'. In 1947 the former Miss Caldwell becomes Mrs Duffus, with an address in Montrose. A visit to West Register House was next on my agenda. This yielded her birth certificate, showing that she was born on 5 June 1914, the daughter of James Caldwell, bank clerk, and Euphemia Caldwell, maiden surname Cruikshank. By the time she marries Roderick John Duffus, teacher, on 16 July 1947, her father has become a bank manager and her mother has died. Thereafter she continues to live in Montrose, changing her address only once. Finally – and this was almost too good to be true – a quick check of the most recent available electoral roll showed that, just under a year previously, Roderick J. Duffus and Kathleen M. Duffus were both still alive, registered to vote, and living at the same address in Montrose.

By this time I had built up in my mind a sense of the likely trajectory of Kathleen's life. In my trade one develops an instinct for this kind of thing. A young girl from a respectable and restricted small-town background wins a place at the university. She goes off to the big city, and the sense of liberation is immense. She dabbles in the arts and mixes with what in those days used to be called a 'fast set'. She is vivacious and charismatic, and of course highly attractive to men. 'Free love' and other such 'modern' ideas are naturally in the air, but

there is something private and elusive about her which enhances her attraction and at the same time inhibits the more sensitive and inward of her admirers. In short she is cut out to be a *femme fatale*, and the object of what Jung would call a 'negative anima projection'. That is clearly the rôle which she plays for Buchanan.

But after some years of this kind of life she begins to become weary. She is slowly sickened by her own inconstancies, her minor deceptions and cruelties. Perhaps – and this is the most likely thing – someone has come along who has deeply engaged her own emotions and done to her what she has so often and so thoughtlessly done to others. Her lack of self-esteem, hitherto so well hidden under a confident and extravert exterior, comes to the surface and she realizes that she hates and despises herself. With an impetuous movement of the will she decides to throw in her present life and return to her home town. Perhaps it is her intention at first to stay for only a short time while she recovers her emotional equilibrium. But she is sucked back into this life which is so much stronger than her, so much more really a part of herself than the superficial life she has been living in Edinburgh, though she doesn't clearly know it. She meets a nice local man – perhaps he is someone she has known all her life and who has always held a candle for her, but whom up to now she has tended, in his very familiarity, affectionately to despise. But she is weary, and he is kind and supportive. He wants her to marry him. Well, why not, after all?

She doesn't love him, perhaps. But everything that really matters to her, she tells herself, is behind her. Nothing is going to bring back Mr X who has betrayed

her, and so on. And she wants to have children before it is too late . . .

Yes, that's the way it must have been, or something very like it. And she does marry and settle down. And have a child. And is happy and contented, after a fashion.

Well, and she is still alive, and perhaps available for interview! Will she want to talk about the past? Is she ashamed of her treatment of Buchanan as so subtly and intricately implied in that wretched novel? Will she want to deny it all, claim that Rosalind was someone else, or pretend that none of it had ever happened? Or, on the contrary, will she welcome the chance to put the record straight and give her own side of the picture?

There was only one way to find out. The prospect of meeting her made me rather nervous, I confess, but I determined to write to her. The letter was very straightforward and most tactful. I said simply that I was writing the biography of Alexander Buchanan and had heard that she might have known him in his youth. There were few of his generation still living, and naturally if she could furnish me with any recollections at all, however sparse they might seem, that would be of the greatest help to me in my work. If, however, the information I had received was wrong or if she was not the person I thought she was – or, indeed, if she simply did not wish to discuss Alexander Buchanan or her possible friendship with him – then that would be the end of the matter and she would hear no more about it. I thanked her in advance but also apologized for the intrusion. With a little trepidation but also with a undeniable sense of excitement, I addressed the envelope and dropped it in the pillar box.

I heard nothing for three weeks. Then I received a

phone call from Mr Duffus, with shocking news. He had found his wife Kathleen sitting dead in her chair one morning, from what proved to be a massive heart attack, with my recently opened letter beside her on the table. You can imagine what I felt. Completely taken aback, I could only mumble my sympathy. But Mr Duffus seemed unresentful, and, though clearly suffering, in control of his emotions. He wanted to know what lay behind my letter so that he could put himself in the picture and come to terms with whatever he had to. Alexander Buchanan was only a name to him, he said, and he had read none of his books, but it appeared his wife had had some connection with the novelist which he would be interested to learn more of. Would I be willing to come and see him? Of course I would, of course. A date was fixed for the following week, and I drove up to Montrose on a bleak and bitter day in early March.

‘Who on earth would write such a letter?’ Mr Duffus asked wistfully, not as if expecting an answer. He gazed out of the sitting-room window, which looked out to the west, in the direction of Brechin where he had met his wife half a century earlier. She had come there as an art teacher at the high school, he explained, where he himself had already been teaching for several years. They had fallen for each other almost at once.

‘And now, to learn something like this – after all these years. One knew, naturally, that she had had a life before she met me – nobody in their thirties has an emotional clean slate, so to speak . . . but that she should have a past haunting enough to kill her, or so it would seem, and that I never had so much as a hint of it – that’s a

bit hard to come to terms with.' The dignified old man was struggling to control his emotions.

'Perhaps you shouldn't make too much of this horrible letter,' I offered lamely. 'It reads to me as if written by someone twisted, motivated by spite.'

'Spite, yes – but why? That's the question.'

I couldn't answer him. The 'letter of sympathy', if it could be called that, had reached Mr Duffus only the previous day, well after our meeting had been arranged, so he had not mentioned it to me before my arrival that morning.

'Besides,' he added, with a sudden sharp look at me, 'it wasn't this letter which killed Kathleen. It was yours.'

This cut me to the quick. Though obviously nothing could have been further from my intention, it did look as if my carefully constructed little missive, which I had thought so tactful and considerate, had made a fatal impact upon Mrs Duffus. Sorry though I was that it had had this consequence – desperately sorry, and not only because it made my own task so much harder – I couldn't help, as a biographer, feeling excited about what it implied. What could there conceivably have been in this woman's past, in her relationship with my subject, that the mere possibility of its exposure should produce such a devastating effect? True, much was already implied in the novel, but even so . . .

All that was whirling about in my head and horribly mixed up with an involuntary sense of shame, and I looked at the floor, avoiding Mr Duffus's eye, once again unable to make a reply.

'I know, I know,' said the old man impulsively, and laying a sympathetic hand on my arm. 'You couldn't have

foreseen that. You couldn't possibly. No blame attaches to you, none at all. I really don't want you to feel bad about it.'

I gulped my gratitude. The old gentleman seemed to get a grip on himself, motioned to me to sit down and took a seat himself opposite me, beside the blazing and comforting log fire. A reluctant bachelor myself, I envied him the cosy domesticity he had enjoyed for all these years.

'But I have to know,' he said with a weary sigh. 'I have to know, for my own peace of mind – I realize that sounds ridiculous, but I can't think how else to put it – I have to know what lies behind all this. The truth, I suppose – we have an ineradicable need to know the truth, however painful it may turn out to be.'

A reflective pause.

'It's odd, isn't it?' the old man resumed. 'It's you who should be doing all the asking, not me. That's why you tried to get in touch with Kathleen, so you could ask her questions. And now here am I questioning you.'

'Yes, it is ironic. The fact is, nobody still alive appears to know anything substantial about this relationship. Buchanan covered his tracks obsessively during his lifetime, and to good effect. And it seems as if your wife was equally successful.'

I feared for a moment that I had gone too far, but Mr Duffus seemed oblivious to my momentary want of tact.

'So the only real evidence', he mused, 'lies in this novel – *First Class Single to Nowhere?*'

'That's correct. But you haven't read it?'

'No. However, if you don't mind, I'd like you to tell me about it.'

I took a deep breath. I had been rather dreading this moment, and hoping it would fail to materialize. It did flash across my mind to duck out of it by suggesting he would do better to read the novel himself, but I decided immediately that this would be cowardly, and even bad faith. I had brought this on the old man, after all, even though unwittingly, and I owed it to him to be frank. I wanted him to trust me, too, to respect my directness, for I would need him on my side as I delved ever deeper in the course of my work. There was no saying what might turn up.

So I launched upon an analysis and interpretation of Buchanan's early masterpiece, realizing as I did so that what it conveys cannot be conveyed otherwise than as the author expressed it. At times I struggled. I concentrated, mainly, on the character – if that's the word for a presence who never makes a live appearance in the book – of Rosalind, which when all is said and done is beyond doubt the heart of the matter. It proved impossible to be evasive. I could not flinch from speaking of the depravity and infamy which Stoddart ends by attributing to Rosalind, even though their substance remains elusive and their reality at times appears ambiguous. I'm afraid that at some points in my narration I got rather carried away in my enthusiasm for the great novel, laying it on a bit thick about Rosalind and her turpitude and even forgetting for an instant that I was talking to the husband of the late original. But I did, recalling myself, urge Mr Duffus to keep always in mind that this was a work of fiction, and although undoubtedly grounded in solid autobiographical fact, still situated principally within the subjectivity of the protagonist.

When I finished and looked once more at the old man (I had not been much conscious of his presence while caught up in my flow), I was rather shocked to see that he looked grey and haggard and had visibly aged during the past few minutes.

'I suppose I shall have to read the damned book,' he muttered at length. 'Where can I get hold of it?'

I told him it was readily available but that I would be very happy to send him a copy as a token of my gratitude for his co-operation and understanding.

'I don't want my daughter to learn anything about this,' he said suddenly. 'I'd be grateful if you don't approach her.'

I readily agreed: it was unlikely that she would have been able to shed any light on these matters.

'You know,' the bereaved husband said thoughtfully after some moments of silence, 'I could never have found it in my heart to believe my wife capable of what this writer alleges, had it not been for that dreadful letter I received yesterday. Fiction I could have dismissed, and I'm sure I would have done so. But after the manner of my wife's death, then this evidence from some unknown source, which appears to corroborate the character Buchanan gives her . . . I'm so confused, Dr Halliday. It all seems so utterly incompatible with my knowledge of the woman I've loved and lived with for half a century. But I'm a realist, Dr Halliday. At the end of the day, I'm a realist.'

I nodded mutely. There was nothing I could say to ease his pain. Before I left, I asked Mr Duffus if he could show me a photograph of his wife in her youth. There was one in the sitting-room of the old couple on a bench

in their garden, taken, he told me, on the occasion of their diamond wedding anniversary; but it didn't tell me much. The old man agreed to my request, if a trifle reluctantly, disappeared and came back a few minutes later with a formal graduation picture. It showed a fine-looking young woman with a direct gaze and a modest smile on her lips, looking not altogether comfortable in her unaccustomed academic garb. Certainly a girl it would have been easy to fall in love with; but at the same time I found it a little disappointing. I got no sense from it of the *femme fatale*, the captivating but deceitful breaker of hearts evoked in Buchanan's teasing paragraphs. But no doubt I was naive to expect anything of the sort. That kind of quality doesn't come out in a photograph, especially a posed and formal one. However, it did provide me with an image to keep in my mind while I pursued her trail, someone I could try to imagine as those who remembered her reminisced.

Unfortunately, though, there didn't prove to be many such people available. Only two, in fact. Mr Duffus gave me a couple of names of enduring friends who had known Kathleen since childhood and still lived locally, and a week or so after I met him I came up again and interviewed both on the same day. The first was useless: she was clearly in the early stages of dementia, had difficulty in understanding what I was driving at, and kept leaving the subject in hand to meander inconsequently through a maze of complete irrelevancies. The other, Mrs Ross, was altogether sharper. She was rather stiff and unaccommodating, though her memory, when she chose to exercise it, was good. She had kept in touch with her friend throughout her Edinburgh years, but she herself had been in Aberdeen for much of that time,

and they had met only seldom. I asked her whether she knew what kind of circles Kathleen had moved in while in Edinburgh. She shrugged, I think sensing a leading question. Nothing out of the ordinary, so far as she knew. She certainly resisted strongly the suggestion that her friend had been in any way a 'bohemian'; indeed, I felt that she perhaps protested rather too much on this score. I asked her specifically whether she was aware of Kathleen's having known any writers. At first this drew no response; but then, a recollection seemingly coming to her, she said she did seem to recall a male friend – no more than that, certainly not a 'beau' – who had literary aspirations. She had no idea what had become of him, though.

'Was the name by any chance Buchanan?' I asked her, leaning forward eagerly as I felt the excitement of the chase mounting in me.

'Buchanan? . . . Yes, it might have been. That's possible.' She thought a little more, her old eyes searching the distance dreamily. 'Or was it Buchan? Yes, I rather think that it was Buchan.' Another pause. Then:

'Anyway, of course, I never met him.'

All of this was very frustrating. I had made what seemed like an exciting breakthrough when the minor literary figure had given me the name, but it had come too late. Not only had the possessor of that name died on me when the prize she represented – not so long before an apparently forlorn hope – was all but within my grasp, but I had come on the scene just at the moment when the events I had to uncover were fading from human memory, disappearing irreclaimably with the wits and the rapidly expiring lives of those who might have recalled them. I

was reminded, not for the first time in my career as a recorder of others' lives, how tenuous and transient are the traces most of us leave on earth – we who think our lives so solid, real and substantial – and that this remained true even for those who, like Alexander Buchanan, had done something to make themselves remembered by more than friends and loved ones, and after those had themselves gone the way of all flesh.

But biographers are resilient creatures, and inclined to be hopeful. I knew from experience that in circumstances like these the only thing to do was to turn from the immediate problem to some more tractable aspect of the task in hand. There were plenty of loose ends to be tied up for Buchanan's later years, and sources were not hard to come by. I busied myself with these and left it to Fate to resolve the enigma of Rosalind, if she were so minded.

A couple of months passed.

Then one fine summer morning as I was sitting at my desk, just thinking that I would have to wrap my project up and send the book off to the publisher if nothing turned up soon on the Caldwell front, who should ring up but my old friend Nancy Cameron, who at that time had the Atholl Browse second-hand bookshop in Blair Atholl.

Nancy knew I was working on a biography of Buchanan – we had talked about it at some length on the occasion of my last visit – and, although she wasn't aware of these latest developments, was always on the look-out for anything which might have the slightest relevance to my project. She had found a reference to Buchanan in what she called a 'manuscript source' in amongst a consignment of books which a friend had cleared from the home of an old lady in Glasgow, who had recently

moved into a nursing home. Nancy had found it intriguing and thought that I would too. There was a provoking sense of mystery about the whole thing which I enjoyed; so instead of pressing her for more details on the phone I arranged to take a trip up to Perthshire the very next day.

I always enjoyed visiting the Atholl Browse, with its endearing atmosphere of organized chaos and the promise of exciting discoveries in unlikely corners. Nancy poured me a cup of coffee, then drew from under a shelf beside the desk a slim volume which turned out to be a kind of yearbook on the theme of old Edinburgh. There was a print or drawing on each left-hand page, and facing it a page divided into four dates, so that the year was covered in about ninety pages. It was not a diary in the usual sense, in that days of the week were not named, so the book could be used in any year. Throughout the volume there were scattered entries, giving a random impression: sometimes there would be a concentration of entries for several days, then nothing for a few weeks, then an odd entry here and there, then another cluster. Each date had space for several brief entries, and for some there might be one for more than one year, while many others were left blank. The entries were written very neatly, in black ink, in a fine, resolute hand, and were absolutely uniform in character. Each consisted of a year, a man's name, and a place; mostly in Edinburgh, in which case there was usually a partial address or the name of a district in the city – but sometimes elsewhere, in which case only (say) 'Glasgow' or 'London' would appear. The earliest entries were for the year 1935 and the last for 1939. To give a few examples:

'George Hendry, Drumsheugh Gardens' occurred frequently during 1935 and the early part of 1936, then petered out. 'Jack Imrie, Glasgow' appeared occasionally in all the years. In 1938 and 1939 there were several fairly widely separated clusters featuring 'Julian Heath, London'. Another recurrent name was 'Archie MacDonald, Howe Street'. Quite a number of names, however, appeared only once or twice; and among them, directed by Nancy, I soon found the one I had quickly realized must be there somewhere. The date was 15 March, and the entry read, '1937. Alexander Buchanan, Marchmont.' In 1937 the future novelist had been in the last year of his honours history course at the university, and was living in lodgings in Marchmont Crescent.

It was inescapably clear to me that this could be nothing other than a woman's record of when and where she had slept with her assorted lovers. Buchanan's name appeared only once. I ascertained this before turning, with wild excitement and equal trepidation, to the title page, where I hoped the diarist might have written her own signature. I was not disappointed. There, inscribed neatly in the top right-hand corner in the same fine hand, was the name 'C. Caldwell'.

All the official documents I had seen had spelt 'Kathleen' with a K, but the name could of course equally be spelt with a C. I concluded that Miss Caldwell had preferred the latter (as indeed I did myself) and had adopted it, at least informally.

I now had virtually irrefutable proof that Buchanan had – almost certainly only once – had physical relations with the woman he fictionalized as 'Rosalind'. This resolved one of the great unanswered questions

about the whole mysterious business; and the fact that it had been only once confirmed several of my hunches as to the nature of the relationship, and shed a great deal of light on the complex ambiguities of its treatment in the great but perplexing novel. Not to mention those repeated cryptic references to 'the Ides of March'! It was a good afternoon's work. I quickly agreed a price with Nancy for what to me was almost literally a priceless volume, and set off for home in a euphoric state.

It is only on the basis of this euphoria that I can excuse myself for what I did next. I was so excited that I felt compelled to phone Mr Duffus to tell him of this latest development. I think that at the back of my mind there was an inchoate feeling that he would want to know his wife had not, so to speak, died in vain: that the truth which her death had threatened to obscure had found an unexpected means of revealing itself. But it was an ill-judged decision. The old man sounded weary and dispirited even when he answered the phone.

'Oh, I see. You've discovered a list of my wife's lovers,' he said bleakly when I had told him of my discovery. And he made it clear that he did not wish to prolong the conversation. That was the last time I spoke to him.

It was about a fortnight after Mr Duffus's funeral, which I attended, that I met once again with the informant to whom I owed so much, but towards whom I felt oddly little gratitude. I had an increasing sense that he knew a good deal more than he had cared to let on, and was probably counting on being able to release his information in small doses to his own advantage. All I could do was squeeze him as best I could. When I saw the tired,

cynical little face turn round to greet me from a bar stool in the Café Royal I felt so repelled that I had to struggle not to show it. Maybe I didn't succeed.

I started by thanking him for the help he had already given me, and began to open up about the discoveries to which this had led. To begin with, as I was getting into my stride, I'm afraid I misinterpreted the amused smirk on his self-satisfied features as admiration for the shrewdness and competence with which I had handled the investigation; but soon I noticed that he was looking down into his beer and passing his hand over his mouth with an affected air of trying to suppress laughter, a gesture which could only be seen as mocking. But when I came to the death of Mrs Duffus, he looked sharply up with an almost shocked expression, and the amused sneer, which he had as it were forgotten to erase, mingled rather horribly with something quite different, something indeed that resembled fear. He held up his hand to stop me.

'Hold on, Alan! There's something I have to tell you at this point. I was waiting for a suitable pause. I'm afraid you've got the name wrong.'

My stomach lurched sickeningly. I stared at him with my mouth open.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. The name was not Kathleen Caldwell, but Christine.'

'What? . . . You said Kathleen, I swear you did!' I could not imagine that if there had been the slightest indistinctness in his pronunciation I would have failed, in such a crucial matter, to have noticed it.

But he shook his head solemnly. 'No. Christine Caldwell. You've got the wrong person. This woman was not from Brechin, she was from Glasgow, and I don't think

she was ever at the university. I believe she worked in an architect's office in some capacity.'

'But I thought you didn't know any more about her than what you told me last time?'

The wretched creature shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know much more than that. It was just what I listened in to on that occasion . . . It was the name you wanted, and I gave it to you. Christine Caldwell.'

I remembered the *C* of the signature on the yearbook and knew that what he was now saying was true. I also realized he had previously lied to me deliberately, out of malice and to make a fool of me. He must somehow have known of the existence of this other Caldwell, Kathleen Caldwell, who had been around Edinburgh at the same time and with whom the other could be fatally confused. Clearly he knew a great deal more than he had let on, and what he did know was almost certainly invaluable. Equally clearly, though, it was out of the question to trust him further. Furious and humiliated, I excused myself without pretence of hiding my feelings and left him sitting at the bar.

As I made my way home through the busy summer streets my thoughts were in turmoil. After frustration and fury my first feeling was of relief – it could not, after all, have been shock at the contents of my letter which killed Mrs Duffus. If she were not the original of Rosalind, not the woman who had betrayed Buchanan, tortured him and lied to him, then even if she had known him – as old Mrs Ross's uncertain memory of a literary friend who could have been Buchanan, or Buchan, might possibly suggest – my inoffensive communication could scarcely have caused an access of emotion sufficient to have ended

her life. Her death at that moment could have been nothing but coincidence.

But later I began to wonder. Coincidences do occur all the time in life – come to think of it, the fortuitous appearance of the precious yearbook amongst the consignment passed on to my friend Nancy could scarcely be anything else – but I have been a biographer long enough never to be quick to attribute to coincidence (leaving aside the fascinating but debatable phenomenon of synchronicity) what could have some other explanation. That Buchanan knew, around the same time, two young women with the surname Caldwell could, for instance, be accounted for by the possibility that they were related. He could, let us surmise, have met Kathleen first, at the university, and been introduced by her to her cousin Christine. And if Buchanan's feelings for Kathleen had never been more than those of friendship, what might have been hers towards him? Had one cousin loved Buchanan, and Buchanan loved the other? And had the heart of the honourable one broken as she saw the emotions of the man she loved taken captive and held in thrall by her morally worthless relative? If so, what might have been the onrush of feeling when all this was suddenly brought back to her, one ordinary morning of her serene old age?

Yes, it was all now falling quite neatly into place.

But isn't there a loose end? you may be thinking. Something that doesn't fit in at all with this theory – that appears, indeed, flatly to contradict it? What about the 'letter of sympathy' to Mr Duffus, that infamous epistle which implied that his deceased wife had been precisely the sort of person characterized by Buchanan in his novel

as the captivating, promiscuous and deceitful Rosalind?
What are we to make of that?

Well, dear friends, I have a confession to make – *I* wrote that letter. I am not proud of it. But in my trade one sometimes has to resort to tricks which one would, in an ideal world, prefer to shun, just to induce people who might otherwise be reticent or unco-operative to talk spontaneously. A sudden shock like the one I had hoped to produce with that letter – it does often work. In this case, of course, it didn't, for reasons that are clear enough. But I had no way of knowing that at the time.

Anyway, in my occupation one is always having to make fresh starts, and all the time I spent on tracking down Kathleen Caldwell will not, I'm sure, turn out to have been wasted. I'm very much back in business now, and raring to go, thanks to that serendipitous discovery among the books of old Mrs Imrie.

But I have a suspicion that Christine Caldwell will prove a hard nut to crack.