

The Various Flavours of

Coffee

Anthony Capella

Extract – Uncorrected proof

Yesterday
a drop of semen,
tomorrow
a handful of spice
or ashes

– Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

Part one

Much about coffee's flavour still remains a mystery

– Ted Lingle, *The Coffee Cupper's Handbook*

One

Who is he, this young man who strolls towards us down Regent Street, a carnation in his collar and a cane in his hand? We may deduce that he is well off, since he is dressed in the most fashionable clothes – but we would be wrong. We may deduce that he likes fine things, since he stops to look in the window of Liberty, the new department store devoted to the latest styles – or is that simply his own reflection he is admiring, the curling locks that brush his shoulders, quite unlike the other passers-by? We may deduce that he is hungry, since his footsteps speed up noticeably as they take him towards the Café Royal, that labyrinth of gossip and dining rooms off Piccadilly; and that he is a regular here, from the way he greets the waiter by name and takes a *Pall Mall Gazette* from the rack as he moves towards a table. Perhaps we may even conclude that he is a writer, from the way he pauses to jot something down in that calfskin-leather pocket book he carries.

Come along; I am going to introduce you. Yes, I admit it – I know this ludicrous young man, and soon you will know him too. Perhaps after an hour or two in his company you will consider you know him a little too well. I doubt that you will like him very much. That is no matter: I do not like him very much myself. He is – well, you will see what he is. But perhaps you may be able to see past that, and imagine what he will become. Just as coffee does not reveal its true flavour until it has been picked, husked, roasted and brewed, so this particular specimen has one or two virtues to go along with his vices, although you may have to look a little harder to spot them... Despite his faults, you see, I retain a sort of exasperated affection for the fellow.

The year is 1896. His name is Robert Wallis. He is twenty-two years old. He is me, my younger self, many years ago.

Two

In 1895 I had been sent down from Oxford, having failed my Preliminary Examinations. My expulsion surprised no one but myself: I had done little work, and had chosen as my associates young men notable for their idleness and dissolution. I learned very little – or perhaps it is fairer to say that I learned too much; those were the days, you will recall, when undergraduates chanted Swinburne as they rioted down the High – *Could you hurt me, sweet lips, though I hurt you? / Men touch them, and change in a trice / The lilies and languors of virtue / For the raptures and roses of vice* – and the college servants still talked in shocked tones of Pater and Wilde. Among the monkish cloisters a mood of languid romanticism prevailed, which prized beauty, youth and indolence above all things, and the young Robert Wallis imbibed this dangerous doctrine along with all the other heady aromas of the place. I spent my afternoons writing poetry, and my father's allowance on silk waistcoats, fine wines, brilliant peacock feathers, slim volumes of verse bound in yellow vellum, and other *objets* essential to the artistic life, all of which were available on ready credit from the tradesmen of the Turl. Since my allowance, like my talent for poetry, was actually rather more meagre than I cared to acknowledge, it was inevitable that eventually this state of affairs would come to a sorry end. By the time I was sent down I had exhausted both my funds and my father's patience, and I was soon faced with the necessity of finding a source of income – a necessity which, I am ashamed to say, I intended to ignore for as long as possible.

London at that time was a great, seething cesspit of humanity, yet even in that dung-heap lilies grew – indeed, they flourished. Out of nowhere, it seemed, there had come upon the capital a sudden outpouring of frivolity. The Queen, in mourning, had retired from public life. Released from her attention, the Prince began to enjoy himself, and where he led, the rest of us followed. Courtiers mingled with courtesans, dandies moved among the *demi-monde*, aristocrats dined with aesthetes and rough trade mixed with royalty. Our house magazine was the *Yellow Book*; our emblem was the green carnation; our style was what came to be known as *nouveau*, and our mode of speech was the epigram – the more paradoxical the better, preferably tossed into the conversation with a certain practised, weary melancholy. We celebrated the artificial above the natural, the artistic above the practical, and, Oscar Wilde notwithstanding, laid claim to extravagant vices which few of us had any intention of

actually indulging. It was a glorious time to be young and in London, and I was to miss most of it – curse it! – all because of a chance remark I happened to make in the hearing of a man named Pinker.

Three

The primary factor affecting the taste is the selection of the beans

– Lingle, *The Coffee Cupper's Handbook*

I was having breakfast in the Café Royal – a plate of oysters and a dish of thickly sliced ham with green sauce – when the waiter brought my coffee. Without glancing up from my newspaper I drank some, frowned, and said, “Damn it, Marsden, this coffee tastes rusty.”

‘It’s ver same as all ver other customers is drinking,’ the waiter said haughtily. ‘None of vem, as I’m aware, have seen the necessity for complaint.’

‘Are you saying I’m pernickety, Marsden?’

‘Will there be anyfink else, sir?’

‘As a waiter, Marsden, you have mastered every skill except waiting. As a wit, you have mastered every requirement except humour.’

‘Fank you, sir.’

‘And yes, I am pernickety. For a well-made cup of coffee is the proper beginning to an idle day. Its aroma is beguiling, its taste is sweet; yet it leaves behind only bitterness and regret. In that it resembles, surely, the pleasures of love.’ Rather pleased with this *aperçu*, I again sipped the coffee that Marsden had brought.

‘Although in this case,’ I added, ‘it seems to taste of nothing much except mud. With, perhaps, a faint aftertaste of rotten apricots.’

“My pleasure, sir.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I turned my attention back to the *Gazette*.

The waiter lingered a moment. “Will the young gentleman be paying for his breakfast this morning?” he enquired, with just a trace of fashionably weary melancholy.

“On my account, please, Marsden. There’s a good fellow.”

After a while I became aware that someone had joined me at my table. Glancing over my newspaper, I saw that my companion was a small gnome-like gentleman, whose sturdy frock coat marked him out from the usual swells and dandies who frequented that place. I was myself expecting to be joined at any moment by my friends Morgan and Hunt, but since the hour was early and the room mostly unoccupied, it would be

no great inconvenience to move to another table when they arrived. I was, however, somewhat curious, since the same surfeit of tables made it all the more surprising that the stranger should sit at mine uninvited.

“Samuel Pinker, sir, at your service,” the gnome-like gentleman said, with a slight inclination of his head.

“Robert Wallis.”

“I could not help overhearing your remark to that waiter. May I?” And without further ado he reached for my cup, raised it to his nostrils, and sniffed it as delicately as I had that morning sniffed the flower I had chosen for my buttonhole.

I watched him, unsure whether to be wary or amused. Many eccentric characters frequented the Café Royal, to be sure, but their eccentricity was generally of a more affected kind, such as carrying a posy of violets, wearing velvet knickerbockers or twirling a diamond-topped cane. Smelling another customer’s coffee was, so far as I knew, unheard of.

Samuel Pinker seemed unperturbed. His eyes half closed, he inhaled the aroma of the coffee twice more, very deliberately. Then he put it to his lips and sipped it. Immediately he had done so he made a curious sucking sound, together with a tiny snake-like flicker of his tongue, as if he were swilling the liquid around his mouth.

“Neilgherry,” he said regretfully. “Over-brewed, not to mention over-roasted. You are quite right, though. Part of the batch was spoiled. The taste of rotting fruit is faint, but unmistakable. May I ask whether you are in the trade?”

“Which trade?”

“Why, the coffee trade, of course.”

I think I laughed out loud. “Good heavens, no.”

“Then may I ask, sir,” he persisted, “what trade you *are* in?”

“I am in no trade at all.”

“Forgive me – I should have said, what is your profession?”

“I do not profess anything very much. I am neither a doctor, nor a lawyer, nor anything useful.”

“What do you *do*, sir?” he said impatiently. “How do you support yourself?”

The truth was that I did not support myself just then, my father having recently advanced me a further small sum against literary greatness, with strict injunctions that there would be no more. However, it seemed absurd to quibble over definitions. “I am a poet,” I confessed, with a certain weary melancholy.

“A famous one? A great one?” Pinker asked eagerly.

“Alas, no. Fame has not yet clasped me to her fickle breast.”

“Good,” he muttered, surprisingly. Then: “But you can write? You can use words well enough?”

“As a writer I consider myself the master of everything except language –”

“Confound these epigrams!” Pinker cried. “I mean – can you describe? Well, of course you can. You described this coffee.”

“Did I?”

“You called it ‘rusty’. Yes – and ‘rusty’ it is. I should never have thought of it – the word would not have come to me – but ‘rusty’ is the, the...”

“The *mot juste*?”

“Exactly.” Pinker gave me a look that reminded me of my Oxford tutor – a look which combined doubt with a certain steely determination. “Enough talk. I am going to give you my card.”

“I shall certainly accept it,” I said, mystified, “although I believe I am unlikely to have need of your services.”

He was already scribbling something briskly on the back of a business card. It was, I could not help noticing, a rather fine card, made of thick ivory paper. “You misunderstand me, sir. It is *I* who have need of *you*.”

“You mean, as some kind of secretary? I’m afraid I –”

Pinker shook his head. “No, no. I have three secretaries already, all extremely proficient in their duties. You, if I may say so, would make a very poor addition to their number.”

“What, then?” I asked, somewhat piqued. I had absolutely no desire to become a secretary, but I had always liked to believe I was capable of it should the occasion arise.

“My need,” Pinker said, looking me in the eye, “is for an aesthete – a writer. When I have found this gifted individual, he will join me in an enterprise which will make fantastically wealthy men of us both.” He handed me the card. “Call on me at this address tomorrow afternoon.”

It was my friend George Hunt’s opinion that the mysterious Mr Pinker intended to start a literary magazine. As it had long been an ambition of Hunt’s to do exactly that

– principally because no existing literary magazine in London had yet seen fit to accept his verses – he believed I should take up the coffee merchant’s offer and call.

“He hardly seemed a literary type.” I turned the card over. On the back was written in pencil, *Admit to my office, please. S.P.*

“Look around you,” Hunt said, waving a hand at our surroundings. “This place is full of those who clutch at the petticoats of the Muse.” It was true that there were often as many hangers-on in the Café Royal as there were writers or artists.

“But he particularly liked it that I called the coffee ‘rusty’.”

The third member of our group - the artist Percival Morgan, who had so far taken no part in the speculation - suddenly laughed. “I know what your Mr Pinker wants.”

“What, then?”

He tapped the back page of the *Gazette*. “‘Branah’s patented invigorating powders,’” he read aloud. “‘Guaranteed to restore rosy health to the convalescent. Enjoy the effervescent vigour of the alpine rest-cure in a single efficacious spoonful.’ It’s obvious, isn’t it – the man wants you to write his advertising.”

I had to admit that this sounded much more likely than a magazine. In fact, the more I considered it, the more probable it appeared. Pinker had specifically asked if I was good at describing – an odd sort of question for a magazine proprietor, but one that made perfect sense for someone who wanted advertisements composed. Doubtless he simply had a new coffee he wished to puff. ‘Pinker’s pick-me-up breakfast blend. Richly roasted for a healthy complexion’, or some such nonsense. I felt an obscure sense of disappointment. For a moment I had hoped – well, that it might be something more exciting.

“Advertising,” Hunt said thoughtfully, “is the unspeakable expression of an unspeakable age.”

“On the contrary,” Morgan said, “I adore advertising. It is the only form of modern art to concern itself, however remotely, with the truth.”

They looked at me expectantly. But for some reason I was no longer in the mood for epigrams.

The following afternoon saw me sitting at my desk, working on a translation of a poem by Baudelaire. At my side, a goblet of pale Venetian glass was filled with golden Rhenish wine; I was writing with a silver pencil on mauve paper infused with

oil of bergamot, and I was smoking innumerable cigarettes of Turkish tobacco, all in the approved manner, but even so it was utterly tedious work. Baudelaire, of course, is a great poet, and thrillingly perverse, but he also tends to be somewhat vague, which makes the translator's job a slow one, and were it not for the three pounds a publisher had promised me for the work I would have jacked it in several hours ago. My rooms were in St John's Wood, close to the Regent's Park, and on a sunny spring day such as this I could hear the distant cries of the ice-cream sellers as they paced back and forth by the gates. It made staying inside rather difficult. And for some reason, the only word I could think of that rhymed with 'vice' was 'strawberry ice'.

"Hang it," I said aloud, putting down my pencil.

Pinker's card lay on one side of the desk. I picked it up and looked at it again. 'Samuel PINKER, coffee importer and distributor.' An address in Narrow Street, Limehouse. The thought of getting out of my rooms, if only for an hour or two, tugged at me like a dog pulling at its master's leash.

On the other side of the desk was a pile of bills. Of course, it was inevitable that a poet should have debts. In fact you could scarcely call yourself an artist if you did not. But just for a moment, I grew dispirited at the thought of eventually having to find the means to pay them. I fingered the top one, a chit from my wine merchant. The Rhenish wine was not only golden in colour: it had cost damn nearly as much as gold as well. Whereas if I agreed to do Mr Pinker's advertisements... I had no idea what a person charged to write those bits of nonsense. But then, I reasoned, the fact that Pinker had resorted to hanging around the Café Royal in search of a writer suggested that he was as much a novice at this as I. Supposing he could be prevailed upon to give me, not just a lump sum, but a retainer? Say that it was – I reached for a reasonable sum and then, finding it not enough, quadrupled it – forty pounds a year? And if the coffee merchant had other friends, business acquaintances, who wanted the same sort of service – why, it wouldn't be long before a man had an income of four hundred pounds a year, and all from writing lines like "Enjoy the effervescent vigour of the alpine rest-cure in a single efficacious spoonful." There would still be plenty of time left over for Baudelaire. True, the Muse might feel somewhat slighted that one was prostituting one's talents in this way, but since one would have to keep the whole thing secret from one's literary acquaintances in any case, perhaps the Muse would not find out either.

I made a decision. Pausing only to pick up Pinker's card, and to pull on a paisley-pattern coat I had bought at Liberty the week before, I hastened to the door.

Let us travel now across London, from St John's Wood to Limehouse. Put like that, it does not sound so very exciting, does it? Allow me, then, to rephrase my invitation. Let us cross the greatest, most populous city in the world, at the very moment when it is at its peak – a journey on which, if you are to accompany me, you will have to employ every one of your senses. Up here by Primrose Hill the air – smell it! – is relatively fresh, with only the faintest sulphuric tinge from the coal fires and kitchen ranges which, even at this time of year, burn in every house. It is once we get past Marylebone that the real fun begins. The hansom cabs and coaches exude a rich smell of leather and sweating horse; their wheels clatter on the stones; gutters are thick with their soft, moist dung. Everywhere streets are brought to a halt by the press of traffic: carts, coaches, carriages, broughams, cabriolets, gigs, coupes, landaus, clarences, barouches, all struggling in different directions. Some are even constructed in the shape of colossal top hats, with the hat-makers' names emblazoned on them in gold letters. The omnibus drivers are the worst offenders, veering from one side to the other, drawing up next to pedestrians, trying to tempt them inside for thruppence or, for a penny less, up on to the roof. Then there are the velocipedes and bicycles, the flocks of geese being driven to the markets, the peripatetic placard-men pushing through the crowds with their boards advertising umbrellas and other sundries, and the milkmaids who simply wander the streets with a bucket and a cow, waiting to be stopped for milk. Hawkers parade trays of pies and pastries; flower sellers thrust lupins and marigolds into your hands; pipes and cigars add their pungent perfume to the mix. A man cooking Yarmouth bloaters at a brazier waves one, speared on a fork, under your nose. "Prime toasters," he cries hoarsely, "tuppence for a toaster." Immediately, as if in response, a chorus of other shouts rises all around. "Chestnuts, 'ot, 'ot, a penny a score.....Blacking, an 'aypenny a skin..... Fine walnuts sixteen a penny....." yell the costermongers' boys. "Here's your turnips," roars back a farmer on a donkey cart. Knife-grinders' wheels shriek and sparkle as they meet the blades. Cadgers offer penny boxes of lucifers, their hands mutely outstretched. And on the outskirts of the crowd – always, always – shuffle the spectral figures of the destitute: the shoeless, breadless, homeless, penniless, waiting to take whatever chances might come their way.

If we ride the underground railway from Baker Street to Waterloo, we will be sharing the narrow platforms with the hot, wet, sooty steam from the locomotives; if we walk down the grand new thoroughfares such as Northumberland Avenue, built to cut through the slums of central London, we will find ourselves amongst a crush of unwashed humanity – since each fine avenue is still surrounded by tenements, and each tenement is a rookery containing up to a thousand families, all living cheek-by-jowl in a fetid stew of sweat, gin, breath and skin. But the day is fine: we shall walk. Though many eye us as we hurry through the back streets of Covent Garden, searching for an exposed handkerchief or a pair of gloves to relieve us of, only the teenage Magdalens in their cheap, gaudy finery speak as we pass, murmuring their lascivious salutations in the hope of fanning a momentary spark of lust. But there is no time for that – no time for anything; we are already horribly late. Perhaps after all we will take a cab; look, there is one now.

As we clatter down Drury Lane we become aware of a faint odour, hardly pleasant, which creeps up these side streets like a poisonous fog. It is the smell of the river. True, thanks to Bazalgette's sewers the Thames is no longer responsible for a stink of rotting waste so foul that Members of Parliament were once forced to souse their curtains with sulphate of lime; but sewers are only effective for those whose modern lavatories are connected to them, and in the tenements great putrid cess-pits are still the norm, leaking their malodorous ooze into London's underground streams. Then there are all the other smells from the industries clustered, for reasons of access, along the waterfront. Roasting hops from the breweries – that's pleasant enough, as is the scent of exotic botanicals from the gin distilleries; but then comes a reek of boiling horse bones from the glue factories, of boiling fat from the soap makers, of fish guts from Billingsgate, of rotting dog-dung from the tanneries. Small wonder that those with sensitive constitutions wear nosegays, or keep brooches filled with eucalyptus salts fixed to their lapels.

As we approach the Port of London we pass beneath great towering warehouses, high and dark as cliffs. From this one comes the rich, heavy smell of tobacco leaves, from the next a sugary waft of molasses, from another the sickly vapours of opium. Here the going is sticky from a burst hogshead of rum; here the way is blocked by a passing phalanx of red-coated soldiers. All around is the chattering of a dozen different languages – flaxen-haired Germans, Chinamen with their black hair in pigtails, Negroes with bright handkerchiefs knotted round their

heads. A blue-smocked butcher shoulders a tray of meat; after him comes a straw-hatted bos'n, carefully carrying a green parakeet in a cage of bamboo. Yankees sing boisterous sail-making songs; coopers roll barrels along the cobbles with a deafening drum-like cacophony; goats bleat from their cages on their way to the ships. And the river – the river is full of vessels, their masts and smokestacks stretching as far as the eye can see: sloops and schooners and bilanders, bafflers full of beer barrels and colliers laden with coal; hoys and eel boats, tea clippers and pleasure cruisers, gleaming mahogany-decked steamers and grimy working barges, all nosing higgledy-piggledy through the chaos, which echoes with the piercing shrieks of the steam whistles, the coalwhippers' shouts, the klaxons of the pilot boats and the endlessly-ringing bells of the barges.

The mind would be moribund indeed that did not feel a stirring of excitement at the boundless, busy energy of it all; at the industry and endeavour which pours out from this great city all over the globe, like bees hurrying to and from the laden, dripping honeycomb at the centre of their hive. I saw no moral force in it, though – it was exciting, but it was thoughtless, and I watched it go by as a man might cheer a circus parade. It took a man like Pinker to see more to it than that – to see that Civilization, and Commerce, and Christianity, were ultimately one and the same, and to grasp that mere trade, unfettered by government, could be the instrument that would bring a great light to the last remaining dark parts of the world.

Four

‘Cedar’ – this lovely, fresh, countrified aroma is that of untreated wood, and is almost identical to that of pencil shavings. It is typified by the natural essential oil of the Atlas cedar. It is more pronounced in mature harvests. – Jean Lenoir, *Le Nez du Café*

The young man about my own age who opened the door to the house in Narrow Street was clearly one of the proficient secretaries Pinker had spoken of. He was impeccably, though conservatively, dressed; his white collar was neatly starched and his hair, which gleamed with Macassar oil, was short – much shorter than my own. ‘Can I help you?’ he said, giving me a cool glance.

I handed him Pinker’s card. ‘Would you tell your employer that Robert Wallis, the poet, is here?’

The young man examined the card. ‘You’re to be admitted. Follow me.’

I followed him into the building, which was, I now saw, a kind of warehouse. Bargemen were unloading burlap sacks from a jetty, and a long chain of storemen were hurrying to various parts of the store, a sack on each shoulder. The smell of roasting coffee hit me like a waft of spice. Oh, that smell.... The building held over a thousand sacks of coffee, and Pinker kept his big drum roasters going day and night. It was a smell halfway between mouth-watering and eye-watering, a smell as dark as burning pitch; a bitter, black, beguiling perfume that caught at the back of the throat, filling the nostrils and the brain. A man could become addicted to that smell, as quick as any opium.

I only got the briefest glimpse of all that as the secretary led me up some stairs and showed me into an office. One window looked on to the street, but there was another, much larger, which gave on to the warehouse. It was at this window that Samuel Pinker was standing, watching the bustle below. Next to him, under a glass bell jar, a small brass instrument clattered quietly, unreeling a spool of thin white paper printed with symbols. The tangled loops, falling like a complicated fleur-de-lys on to the polished floorboards, were the only untidy thing in the room. Another secretary, dressed very like the first, was sitting at a desk, writing with a steel safety pen.

Pinker turned and saw me. "I will take four tons of the Brazilian and one of the Ceylon," he said sternly.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, nonplussed.

"Payment will be freight on board, with the proviso that none spoils during the voyage."

I realised he was dictating. "Oh, of course. Do carry on."

He frowned at my impertinence. "Ten per cent will be held back against future samples. I remain, et cetera, et cetera. Take a seat." This last comment clearly being addressed to me, I sat. "Coffee, Jenks, if you please," he said to the secretary. "The four and the nine, with the eighteen to follow. I'll sign those while you're gone." He turned his gaze back to me. "You told me you were a writer, Mr Wallis," he said sourly.

"Indeed."

"Yet my secretaries have been unable to find a single work by you in any Charing Cross bookshop. Mr W.H Smith's subscription library has never heard of you. Even the literary editor of *Blackwood's Magazine* is strangely unfamiliar with your work."

"I am a poet," I said, somewhat taken aback by the diligence of Pinker's researches. "But not a published one. I thought I had made that clear."

"You said you were not yet famous. Now I discover you are not yet even heard of. It is hard to see how you could be the one without being the other, is it not?" He sat down heavily on the other side of the table.

"I apologise if I gave the wrong impression. But –"

"Hang the impression. *Precision*, Mr Wallis. All I ask from you – from anyone – is precision."

In the Café Royal Pinker had seemed diffident, even unsure of himself. Here in his own offices, his manner was more authoritative. He took out a pen, uncapped it and reached for the pile of letters, signing each one with a rapid flourish as he spoke. "Take me, for example. Would I still be a merchant if I had never sold a single sack of coffee?"

"It's an interesting question –"

"It is not. A merchant is someone who trades. Ergo, if I do not trade, I am not a merchant."

“But a writer, by the same token, must therefore be someone who *writes*,” I pointed out. “It is not strictly necessary to be read as well. Only desirable.”

“Hmm.” Pinker seemed to weigh this. “Very well.” I had the feeling I had passed some kind of test.

The secretary returned with a tray on which were four thimble-sized cups and two steaming jugs, which he placed in front of us. “So,” his employer said, gesturing to me. “Tell me what you make of these.”

The coffee was evidently freshly brewed – the smell was deep and pleasant. I tried some, while Pinker watched expectantly.

“Well?”

“It’s excellent.”

He snorted. “And? You are a writer, are you not? Words are your stock-in-trade?”

“Ah.” I realised now what he wanted. I took a deep breath. “It is completely ...invigorating. Like an Alpine sanatorium – no – like a sea-side rest cure. I can think of no better, balmier, more bracing pick-me-up than Pinker’s breakfast blend. It will aid the digestion, restore the concentration and elevate the constitution, all at once.”

“*What?*” The merchant was staring at me.

“Of course, it needs a little work,” I said modestly. “But I think the general direction is workable –”

“Try the other one,” he said impatiently.

I started to pour from the second jug. “Not in the same cup!” he hissed.

“Sorry.” I filled a second thimble-sized cup and sipped from it. “It’s different,” I said, surprised.

“Yes, of course,” Pinker said. “And?”

It had not really occurred to me before then that there was coffee and coffee. Of course, coffee might be watery, or stale, or over-brewed – in fact, it was often all those things – but here were two coffees, both palpably excellent, whose excellence varied from each other as chalk from cheese.

“How might one deal with such a difference in words?” he said, and although his expression had not changed I had a sense that this was the nub of our conversation.

“This one,” I said slowly, gesturing at the second cup, “has an almost... smoky flavour.”

Pinker nodded. "It does indeed."

"Whereas this one," I pointed at the first, "is more ...flowery."

"Flowery!" Pinker was still staring at me. "Flowery!" But he seemed interested – even, I thought, impressed. "Here – let me make a –" He pulled the secretary's pad towards him and jotted down the word 'flowery'. "Go on."

"This second cup has – a sort of tang."

"What sort of tang?"

"More like pencil shavings."

"Pencil shavings." Pinker wrote this down too. "Exactly."

It was like a parlour game, enjoyable but pointless. "While the other – chestnuts, perhaps?" I said.

"Perhaps," Pinker said, making a note. "What else?"

"This one," I indicated the second cup, "tastes of spice."

"Which spice?"

"I'm not sure," I confessed.

"Never mind." Pinker said, crossing out 'spice'. "Ah, there you are. Capital. Pour it, will you?"

I turned. A young woman had entered with another jug of coffee. She was, I noted automatically – in those days I considered myself something of a connoisseur on this particular subject – rather attractive. She wore the Rational style of dress that many professional women were adopting just then. A tailored jacket, buttoned high up to the neck, worn above a long skirt without a bustle, revealed little of the slight figure underneath. Her features, though, were alert and lively, and her hair, although carefully pinned, was elegant and golden.

She filled one of the cups and handed it carefully to me. "My thanks," I said, catching her eye with a frank smile as I took it. If she noticed my interest she did not reveal it; her face was a mask of professional detachment.

"Perhaps you would take notes, Emily," Pinker said, pushing his pad towards her. "Mr Wallis was just trying to decide which spice our finest Brazilian reminded him of, but inspiration has temporarily deserted him."

The secretary seated herself at the table and raised her pen. For a moment, as she waited for me to resume, I could have sworn I discerned a hint of amusement – of mischievousness, even – deep in her grey eyes. But it was hard to be sure.

I drank some of the new coffee, but to begin with I could taste nothing at all. "I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head.

"Blow on it," Pinker suggested.

I blew, and drank some more. It was, I realised, very ordinary compared to the other two. "This is what they serve at the Café Royal!"

"Very like it, yes." Pinker was smiling. "Is it – ha! – is it rusty?"

"A little." I tried some more. "And dull. Very dull. With a faint aftertaste of – wet towels." I glanced at the stenographer. She was busy writing it all down – or rather, I now saw, making a series of curious, almost Arabian squiggles on her pad. This must be the Pitman's Phonographic Method I had read of, I realised.

"Wet towels," Pinker repeated with a chuckle. "Very good, though I'm afraid I have never actually tasted a towel, wet or dry."

The secretary's pen stopped, waiting. "And it smells like – old carpet," I said. Immediately, my words were translated into more dashes and strokes.

"Carpet!" Pinker nodded. "Anything else?"

"A whiff of burnt toast." More squiggles.

"Burnt toast. Well. That will do, I think, for the moment."

The girl's notations did not even occupy a full page of her notebook. I felt a foolish desire to impress her. "So which one of these is yours?" I asked the merchant, gesturing at the jugs.

"What?" Once again Pinker seemed surprised by the question. "Oh, all of them."

"And which do you want to advertise?"

"Advertise?"

"Of this one," I said, pointing to the first jug, "you might say...." I raised the cup. "A choice concoction, the cream of the colonies, with an ambrosial chestnut taste." Was it my imagination, or did the stenographer give a faint snort of laughter, instantly suppressed? "Though I've noticed most advertisements do tend to stress the health side of things. Perhaps: 'It's the choice chestnut taste that cheers the constitution.'"

"My dear Wallis," Pinker said, "you would make a truly terrible advertising man."

"I don't believe I would."

"People want their coffee to taste of coffee, not chestnuts."

“We could tell them how good the chestnut part of it is.”

“The essence of advertising, of course,” he said thoughtfully, “is to conceal the truth, by revealing only those parts which coincide with what the public wants to hear. The essence of a code, on the other hand, is to fix the truth precisely for the benefit of the few.”

“That’s very good,” I said, impressed. “That’s almost an epigram. Er . . . what’s this about a code?”

“Young man,” Pinker said, looking at me intently, “listen carefully to what I am about to say. I am going to make you a very important proposal.”

Five

“We live, Mr Wallis, in an Age of Improvement.” Pinker sighed and pulled a watch from his fob pocket. He looked at it with an expression of reluctance, as if this were a subject which required more time than at this precise moment he could spare. “Take this timepiece,” he said, holding it up by its chain. “It is both more accurate than any watch produced in previous decades, and less costly. Next year, it will be cheaper and more accurate still. Do you know how much the latest Ingersoll sells for?”

I confessed myself ignorant on this score.

“A single dollar.” Pinker nodded. “And then consider the benefits. Consistency – the first requirement of trade. You doubt it? More accurate timepieces mean more accurate railways. More accurate railways mean more trade. More trade means cheaper, more accurate timepieces.” He picked up a pen from the table. “Or take this safety pen. It has its own inkwell, ingeniously contained within the barrel – do you see? Which means my secretaries can write more speedily, so we can do more business, etcetera, etcetera. Or –” He reached into his fob pocket again and dug something out with his thumb and forefinger. “Look at this.” He was staring intently at a tiny nut-and-bolt. “What a remarkable thing this is, Wallis. The bolt was made in – oh, Belfast, shall we say. The nut, perhaps, was made in Liverpool. Yet they fit together exactly. The threads, you see, have been *standardised*.” The stenographer’s pen was flying across her pad by now – she must have been under instruction to record all these extempore speeches of her employer’s, or perhaps she was doing it for her own education. “A few years ago every workshop and machine room in the country produced their own design of thread. It was chaos. It was impractical. Now, thanks to the impetus of Improvement, there is only one. Are you a believer in the theories of Mr Darwin?”

Taken aback by the abrupt change of topic, and cautious of giving offence – Darwin was a topic on which my Oxford tutors had tended to become heated – I said that, on balance, I probably was.

Pinker nodded approvingly. “What Darwin shows us is that Improvement is inevitable. For species, of course, but also for countries, for races, for individuals, even for nuts and bolts. Now. Let us consider how Mr Darwin’s ideas may benefit the coffee trade.”

I tried to look as if I might conceivably have some useful suggestions to contribute to this subject, and had only chosen not to voice them out of deference to the greater wisdom of my companion. It was a look I had often been required to employ in my tutor's rooms at Oxford. However, it was not needed now: Pinker was in full flow.

"First, the brewing. How may this process be Improved? I will tell you, Mr Wallis. By steam."

"Steam? You mean – a mill?"

"In a manner of speaking. Imagine if every café and hotel had its own steam engine for making coffee. Just as in the manufacture of cotton or corn, we would see consistency. Consistency!"

"Wouldn't it make the cafés rather - well, rather hot?"

"The engine I am describing is a miniature one. Jenks, Foster," he called, "bring in the apparatus, will you?"

After a brief pause, and a certain amount of banging, the two male secretaries wheeled in a trolley on which sat a curious mechanism. It seemed to consist of a copper boiler, together with a quantity of brass pipes, levers, dials and tubing.

"Signor Toselli's steam-powered coffee-machine," Pinker said proudly. "As demonstrated at the Paris Exhibition. The steam is forced through the grounds one cup at a time, giving a much superior taste."

"How is it heated?"

"By gas, although we anticipate an electric model eventually." He paused. "I've ordered eighty."

"Eighty! Where will they all go?"

"To Pinker's Temperance Taverns." Pinker jumped to his feet and started pacing up and down. Behind him, Jenks was lighting the boiler: the apparatus hissed and whistled softly as its owner spoke. "Oh, I anticipate what you are about to say. You wish to point out that there exists, at this time, not a single Pinker's Temperance Tavern in the land. But they will come, Wallis; they will come. I intend to apply the principles of the safety pen and the Ingersoll timepiece. Look at London. A public house on every corner! Gin palaces, most of 'em, where the working man is fleeced of his hard-earned wages. What does his intoxication benefit him? It makes him a drudge, a wife beater. It makes him so incapable that he is often unable even to stagger home, and must spend the night in the gutter, ruining him for employment the

following day. Yet coffee – coffee! – offers no such drawbacks. It does not incapacitate: rather, it invigorates. It does not dull the senses, but sharpens them. Why should we not have a coffee-house on every street instead? It would be an Improvement, would it not? Yes? Then, if it is an Improvement, it must happen – it *will* happen. Darwin says so! And I will be the one to *make* it happen.” He sat down, dabbing at his forehead with his sleeve.

“You mentioned a code,” I said. “I still don’t quite see –”

“Yes. Demand and supply, Mr Wallis. Demand and supply.”

He paused, and I waited, and the secretary’s dainty hand paused on her pad. She had exceptionally long, elegant fingers. One could imagine them playing a violin or pressing on the keyboard of a piano. One could imagine them, in fact, doing all sorts of things, some of them deliciously improper...

“The difficulty with my plans,” Pinker explained, “is cost. Coffee is expensive stuff – much more costly than beer, say, or gin. Well, it comes from further away, of course. You order it through an agent, who in turn gets it from another agent – it’s a wonder it reaches us at all.” He looked at me. “And so we ask ourselves – what?”

“We ask ourselves,” I suggested, dragging my attention back to him, “how the supply could be Improved?”

Pinker snapped his fingers. “Exactly! We’ve made a start with this Exchange. You’ve heard of the Exchange, I take it?”

I had not.

He placed his hand on the bell jar in which the printing machine still clicked and clattered quietly to itself, spooling its line of symbols endlessly on to the floor. “The London Coffee Exchange will revolutionise the way we do business. It’s linked by submarine cable to New York and Amsterdam. Prices will standardise – all across the world. The price will fall – it’s bound to.” He shot me a crafty look. “Can you spot the difficulty?”

I thought. “You don’t actually know what you’re getting. You’re buying by numbers – on cost alone. You want to find the good stuff – for your taverns – and pass on the rest. That way, you get the benefit of the lower prices, and other people get the dross.”

Pinker sat back and regarded me with a smile. “You’ve got it, sir. You’ve got it.”

The apparatus suddenly gave out a kind of wheezing, bubbling screech. Jenks pulled some levers, and an unpleasant gargling sound issued from its several throats as liquid and steam together hissed into a miniature cup.

I said, “If you have a code – no, code’s not quite the word – if you have a trading *vocabulary*, a way of describing the coffee you and your agents have fixed in advance, then even though you’re in different countries –”

“Exactly!” Pinker picked up the bolt, took the nut in his other hand, and placed them together. “We have our bolt and we have our nut. The two will fit together.”

Jenks placed two tiny cups in front of Pinker and me. I picked mine up. It contained no more than an egg-cup’s worth of thick black liquid, on which floated a honeycomb of hazelnut-brown froth. I rotated the cup: the contents were dense and sluggish, like oil. I raised it to my lips –

It was as if the very essence of coffee had been concentrated into that tiny morsel of liquid. Burnt embers, woodsmoke and charred fires danced across my tongue, caught at the back of my throat, and from there seemed to rush up directly to my brain ... and yet it was not acrid. The texture was like honey or molasses, and there was a faint, biscuity sweetness that lingered, like the darkest chocolate, like tobacco. I finished the tiny cup in two gulps, but the taste seemed to grow and deepen in my mouth for long moments afterwards.

Pinker, watching me, nodded. “You have a palate, Mr Wallis. It is rough and somewhat untutored, but you can apply yourself in that sphere. And – more importantly – you have the gift of using words. Find me the words that can capture – can standardise – the elusive taste of coffee, so that two people in different parts of the world can telegraph a description to each other, and each know exactly what is meant by it. Make it authoritative, evocative, but above all precise. That is your task. We shall call it.....” He paused. “We shall call it The Pinker-Wallis Method Concerning the Clarification and Classification of the Various Flavours of Coffee. What do you say?”

He was looking at me expectantly.

“It sounds fascinating,” I said politely. “But I could not possibly do what you suggest. I am a writer – an artist – not some manufacturer of phrases.” My God, the coffee from that machine was strong: I could feel my heart starting to race from its effects.

“Ah. Emily anticipated that this might be your response.” Pinker nodded towards the secretary, whose head was still lowered demurely over her notebook. “At her suggestion, I took the liberty of establishing your father’s address and sending him a telegram about this offer of employment. You may be interested to see the Reverend Wallis’s reply.” Pinker pushed a telegram slip across the table. I picked it up: it started with the word ‘*Hallelujah!*’ “He seems quite keen to be relieved of the burden of supporting you,” he said drily.

“I see.”

“Tell him allowance terminated stop. Grateful opportunity stop. God bless you sir stop.”

“Ah.”

“And in the light of your being sent down – your father mentions that in passing too – taking orders or indeed schoolmastering are avenues now probably closed to you.”

“Yes,” I said. My throat seemed to have gone dry. Jenks placed another tiny cup of coffee in front of me. I threw it down my throat. Fragrant charcoal and dark chocolate flooded my brain. “You mentioned fantastic wealth.”

“Did I?”

“Yesterday, at the Café Royal. You said that if I entered into your ...scheme, we would both become fantastically wealthy men.”

“Ah, yes.” Pinker considered. “That was a figure of speech. I was employing...” He glanced at the secretary. “What was I employing?”

“Hyperbole,” she said. It was the first time she had spoken. Her voice was low, but again I thought I discerned a faint note of amusement. I glanced at her, but her head was still bent over the notepad, recording every word with those damn squiggles.

“Exactly. I was employing hyperbole. As a literary person, I’m sure you appreciate that.” Pinker’s eyes glinted. “Of course, at the time I was not fully apprised of your own somewhat straitened circumstances.”

“What remuneration – exactly – are you suggesting?”

“Emily here informs me that Mrs Humphrey Ward was paid ten thousand pounds for her last novel. Despite the fact that she is the most popular writer in the country and you are completely unknown, I propose to pay you at the same rate.”

“Ten thousand pounds?” I repeated, amazed.

“I said the same *rate*, sir, not the same *amount* – once again I have to warn you of the dangers of imprecision.” He smiled – the brute was enjoying this. “Mrs Ward’s opus is approximately two hundred thousand words long – or six shillings and thruppence a word. I will pay you six and thruppence for every descriptor adopted for our code. And a bonus of twenty pounds when it is complete. That is fair, is it not?”

I passed my hand across my face. My head was spinning. I had drunk far too much of that damn coffee. “The Wallis-Pinker Method.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It must be called the Wallis-Pinker Method. Not the other way round.”

Pinker frowned. “If a Pinker is the originator, surely Pinker must have the greater share of the credit.”

“As the writer, the bulk of the work will fall to me.”

“If I may say so, Wallis, you have not yet fully grasped the principles by which business is conducted. If I want to find a more amenable employee, I can simply go down to the Café Royal and get myself one. I found you within five minutes, after all. Whereas if you want to find yourself another employer, you will be hard pushed to do so.”

“Possibly,” I said. “But no two writers are exactly the same. How can you be sure that the next man will do as good a job?”

“Hmm.” Pinker considered. “Very well,” he conceded abruptly. “The Wallis-Pinker method.”

“And as this is a literary work, I will need an advance. Thirty pounds.”

“That is a very considerable amount.”

“It is customary,” I insisted.

To my surprise, Pinker shrugged. “Thirty pounds it is, then. Do we have an agreement?”

I hesitated. I had been going to say that I would have to think about it, that I must take advice. I could already imagine the sneers of my friends Hunt and Morgan if I ever told them of this commission. But – I could not help it – I glanced at the girl. Her eyes were shining, and she gave me... not a smile exactly, but a kind of tiny signal, the eyes widening with the briefest nod of encouragement. In that moment I was lost.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” the merchant said, standing up and offering me his hand. “We start in this office tomorrow morning, sir, sharp at ten o’clock. Emily, will you be so good as to show Mr Wallis out?”