

# Marvellous

## Neil Ferguson

He recognised her the moment she walked into the shop. He looked up and knew her at once, as if he had been passing the time of day until she turned up. It wasn't her features, the turn of her head, the movement of a woman of a certain age who hasn't forgotten the ballet lessons she received as a girl. It was the sum of these things, what Jane Austen would have called her *air*, which was unmistakable. In addition, she had – she *still* had – that thing *Vogue* style writers extol: *dash* – the charcoal trenchcoat from Aquascutum, the sheer smoky-grey tights, the high-heeled brogues, which added up to what all women desire most in the world: *un look*.

She paused, shaking her wet umbrella over the carpet. She wasn't passing trade. She hadn't come in out of the rain or to browse because she was looking around for an assistant to enquire about a particular book. From the customer's leather armchair Giles watched Mavis, the dear girl, approach the woman and disencumber her of the wet umbrella, placing it for her in the umbrella-stand that was next to the entrance for customers' convenience. Mavis, too, could sense it. The rich and famous occasionally passed through the doors of the bookshop, which enjoyed a reputation among people who know about books, and so she was accustomed to the look of those who are accustomed to being looked at. Alice Quinn wasn't famous nor, as far as he knew, rich. But she carried herself as if she were. She always had.

He approached Mavis and their dashing customer.

'All right, Mavis,' he said.

Alice looked from the young woman to the older man.

'Hullo,' she said. 'I'm told you have a good selection of dictionaries . . .'

So he did. Language reference books were his particular interest. Such stock moved slowly but with steady reliability like the passage of the seasons. People always need dictionaries, as they need tape-measures and scissors.

Alice's hair, even wind-tossed, had retained its fine lustre, which blonde hair often loses over time.

'Would you like to follow me?'

He preceded her down the iron spiral staircase to the basement where the weightier volumes were kept. She hadn't recognised him, then. Was that so surprising? The hair that had once been abundant, down to his shoulders, gingerish rather than carrot, had disappeared almost entirely. What hair he had now sprouted out of his face, even from his ears and eyebrows, and was no colour at all. Tubby rather than portly. Wearing a shirt and a tie under a thermal top. Bifocal spectacles on a cord around his neck. Who could blame her for failing to connect such an owlish figure with that skinny wretch who had been a peripheral member of her set at university half a lifetime ago? The one who never had a girlfriend; whom some, consequently, supposed was queer. The odd-looking one in National Health specs who scribbled words into notebooks. Who wrote poetry. That one.

So what had changed? He had long given up writing poetry. He no longer nursed

ambitions in that direction. In place of looking odd he had cultivated a comportment appropriate to his profession. There had been no woman, not as a permanent fixture. A few ships had passed in the night, although the further he drifted from the coastal waters of his twenties, the rarer such encounters had become. He had remained peripheral to life.

The slender legs in the elegant narrow heels stepped carefully down the cast-iron staircase.

'Dictionaries: foreign, British, American . . . Etymologies. Grammars. Style manuals. What were you after exactly?'

He was alone in the reference section of his bookshop with Allie Quinn and her expensive perfume.

'May I take off my raincoat?'

'Of course.'

He helped her out of her Aquascutum trench coat and hung it on the hook alongside his own mac.

She was wearing a greeny kilt, not too short, and a wine-coloured knitted sweater. Her figure – *pleasing*, Miss Austen might have called it – was one any twenty-five-year-old girl would have been glad of. But he knew how old she was because she was his own age. To be precise, she was two months older than him. She sat down in the customer's leather armchair. She crossed her legs. She took in the expensive modern décor.

'To tell the truth, I'm not sure what I'm after *exactly*. All those books you mentioned, I should think.'

'Why so?'

'Because . . . ' She shrugged. Words failed her. ' . . . Words fail me. All the time. I'm fed up with them! They get on my nerves. People use them how they like. Are they allowed to? I never know what they *mean!*'

'They strain, crack and sometimes break under the burden. Under the tension . . . '

'I'll say they do!'

'They slip, slide, perish. Decay with imprecision. Will not stay in place. Will not stay still.'

'I can see I've come to the right shop.'

'I can assure you, Madam, you have. Which kind of words are upsetting you?'

'Which *kind*? Are there different *kinds*?'

'We use different words for different circumstances.'

'Ordinary, everyday words. My son and my husband, when they're talking to each other – when they *do* talk to each other – don't understand what the other is saying. Even though they use the same words, they keep having misunderstandings. As I do with *both* of them. It's maddening!'

'It's the nature of our condition, I think you'll find.'

'What condition? I taught my son to speak. I want to be able to converse with him! He hardly speaks the language I taught him any more!'

It didn't sound as if dictionaries would solve her problem.

'The meaning of words changes over time,' he said.

'But if they mean different things to different people, well . . . '

Words failed her.

'Are you talking about colloquial usage? Street talk? Slang?'

'All language is slang, as far as I can tell.'

‘That’s an interesting point of view.’

‘I went to a posh girls’ school where they taught us to speak like the Queen. It was the slang of the English upper crust.’

He directed her attention towards the non-standard language books. Tony Thorne’s *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*. Flexner’s *Dictionary of American Slang*. He left her to peruse these and any other volumes that snagged her interest. After a few minutes he sent Mavis down with a cup of Earl Grey tea and a chocolate biscuit.

Because it was Wednesday he had dropped into the Cherry Tree on White Hart Lane in the centre of the city for a spot of lunch. It was pleased to call itself a city – by Royal Charter, no less – but the whole medieval jumble, the ugly post-war shopping precinct and the new suburbs you could have put into Battersea and still had change. Wednesday was market day. He was looking forward to hearing the local accents of farmers and their wives exchanging gossip while they drank beer and laughed and ate pork pies. The talk of men of Kent in their second-best clothes. Sometimes he recorded words or phrases in his notebook, because the speech of these men and women that had evolved over hundreds of years wouldn’t be here much longer. It was already quite rare. While he was looking for a space at the bar, he caught sight through the crowd, incongruously, of Alice Quinn, the last person he expected to see among the loamy aromas in the Cherry Tree on market day. She was standing against the panelling between two blokes he had never seen before. One of the blokes was quite close to her. His hand was resting against her side, under her arm, while his thumb caressed the underside of her breast. He was speaking. She was listening. Catching sight of Giles, she shouted across the throng: ‘Darling! Over here!’

Dressed in a white *crêpe-de-chine* summer frock with blue polka dots on it, without a bra, cinched by a narrow white leather belt, her hair brushed straight down over her shoulders, she looked very beautiful. She was pleased to see him.

The two blokes weren’t students. You could tell at a glance. They weren’t too old; they just looked too old. Dozens of small signs indicated that they belonged to another tribe entirely: the shortish hair, the longish sideburns, the Italian two-button suit jackets with narrow lapels and trousers without turn-ups, the Ben Sherman shirts with button-down collars, the thin nondescript ties. They looked like dealers – a pair of villains doing their best to pass as straight.

Alice, squeezing out from where she was wedged between her two chums, took Giles in her arms and kissed his lips. Leaving her arm around his waist, she said, ‘Must fly, guys. We’ve had such a lovely chat. But we’re already late . . .’ She turned to Giles. ‘When does it start, darling?’

‘Soon,’ he said.

She gave them a sweet smile. Neither man said a word nor moved a muscle. They just looked at her – and him – very carefully.

Outside the pub they walked quickly into the crowd. Alice was shaking so much he had to take her into the Curfew and buy her a brandy and soda.

‘Have you got a cigarette?’

He rolled a cigarette and lit it for her.

‘You arrived just in time.’

‘Dodgy business deal?’

'Don't ask!'  
'What were they selling?'  
'*Selling?* What are you talking about? They weren't *dealers!* They were *coppers!*  
From the drugs squad! Two of Darnell's men!'  
'What did they want?'  
'What they always want: information, money, sex. Whatever you've got.'  
'So what do they have on you?'  
'What do you mean?'  
'Well, they obviously have something or you'd tell them to go fuck themselves.  
Have you been caught *in flagrante delicto?*'  
'If that means *red-handed*, the answer's *yes!*'  
'How much?'  
She didn't want to tell him. But in a sense, he already knew.  
'A weight. I was set up.'  
'No shit? You're looking at a spot of chokey, then.'  
'Thank you for spelling it out for me!'

Alice had attended a posh girls' school somewhere in Dorset where she had been taught ballet and how to bake cakes; how to get in and out of a sports car without showing her knickers; how, in a gathering of strangers, to make for the fireplace where her presence would be acknowledged. She knew how to put men at their ease, how to comport herself. To have an *air*. She bought her clothes in London. That pretty frock with the bold floral pattern might be a Celia Birtwell print run up by Ossie Clarke. She had *dash*.

She had a room at the top of a house in Pound Lane. They all had four-quid-a-week rooms in old, even ancient houses between West Gate and East Gate. After their lectures at the university they met up in each other's rooms or in a pub, sometimes the Unicorn, which had been there in Chaucer's day, joisted out of oak beams; if they wanted a noisy jukebox, the Sun or the Three Tuns. There were other pubs as well. The city was full of pubs. They drank bitter or cider. At weekends they drove into the country or to the sea and walked until they found a nice pub. After the pubs shut they went back to someone's room and got high on spliffs of Moroccan black.

At the sea at Stoneham the dunes were spiked with long timothy grass and stretched uninterrupted from one horizon to the other. There were recesses in the sand where a party could escape the wind and make a picnic. The sea, a quarter of a mile away, roared quietly as if from inside a shell. You could swim nude here, if you felt like it; no one ever came by. The boys, who sometimes swam nude, liked to body-surf. The girls, who never swam nude, draped themselves along the groynes. They were all, the boys and the girls, fine swimmers. They had strong, beautiful bodies. Some days the waters came from the North Sea, other days from the English Channel. He never swam.

Alice, who had the hem of her dress tucked into her knickers like a girl about to ride a bicycle, was preparing a salad to have with the mutton pies they had bought from the pub in the village. The plates and cups and cutlery were a matching set from her 1950s picnic valise. She had baked a cake. There was tea in the two Thermos flasks, milk in the glass bottle, sugar in the green bakelite container. The dope was

in the cake.

'What are you reading?' she asked him.

They were alone among the dunes. He was reading *Upon Appleton House*.

'Marvell,' he said.

'*Marvell?* What luck! I have to write a paper on Marvell for Professor Faulks. You can tell me what to write!'

He never swam because he didn't know how. He hated the sea.

After a bit she said, 'Aren't you hot?'

He had the long sleeves of his shirt buttoned down at his wrists, the collar up, a hat on his head. He possessed that wretched dermatological combination some red-haired people have: white skin with freckles that goes pink in the sun and often, as in his own case, accompanies a tendency to suffer from hay fever.

'*Hot?* I'm hot as a hot dog!'

'Shall we go for a walk?'

He glanced in the direction of the bathers, impressionist splodges in the distance.

'Don't worry about *them!*' she said. 'They won't ever worry about *you.*'

They walked along the crest of the low grassy sea-cliff that separated the sea from the flat marshland called the saltings. At the sluice-gate they headed inland to where a few sheep stood about and the hedge trees offered some shade. They talked about Marvell – or, rather, he talked while she listened. He recited chunks to her from memory. A bevy of waders, godwits or redshank, rose out of the marsh at their approach. A lone egret flapped in the air like washing. When they reached the belt of trees, they paused to rest. As he talked, she began to unbutton the front of her dress, slipping her arms out of the sleeves, and then – 'Go on. I'm listening . . .' – she spread it flat on the grass like a sheet for them to lie on. Her breasts lolled. She did this, then stepping out of her panties, as if it was a normal thing for a girl to do in the circumstances. She sat on the dress, naked, waiting for him. Although he had desired Alice Quinn since the first day he had seen her, faced with her invitation for him to enact his most carnal fantasies about her, he balked. He was nervous.

'Don't be coy!' She smiled up at him. '*We* have world enough – *and* time!'

The broken sunlight through the leaves made shifting patterns on her naked skin. She struck a girlie pose, angling her arms behind her head and thrusting out her tits for him to admire.

'You like?'

He liked. He removed his boots, his trousers, his shirt and the rest of his clothes, exposing his pale freckled skin to her gaze. His penis was white like a maggot. She drew him down onto the white dress. She ran the tips of her fingers across his back. She brushed her lips against the fine ginger hairs on the side of his arm.

'What lovely soft skin you have!' she said. 'You lucky thing!'

She removed his specs.

The event passed off satisfactorily, considering his anxiety that it might not. In fact, it was a pleasant roll in the hay. After they had lain in each other's arms for a while, he explored her body – leaning over her, he took one of her nipples into his mouth – and she had responded. Soon they were panting with exertion. At her cry a stock dove, startled, fluttered noisily out of the branches of the tree overhead and flew off.

They lay still while their pulses slowed, dozing in the warmth of the afternoon. His hand stroked the inside of her thigh. In the distance, a cuckoo. He was in Allie Quinn's arms on her dress spread over the grass. The taste of her skin was in his mouth. The sun was winking through the green shade above them. Time dilated. In his life, there would be everything that had happened to him before this moment – and everything that happened to him after it.

*Cuck-oo! . . . Cuck-oo! . . .*

After twenty minutes or so Alice woke from her snooze. She turned towards him and kissed his shoulder.

'That was nice. Thank you!'

She buttoned herself back into her dress. He watched her as if waking from a dream.

They walked back the way they had come along the raised path to the sandy sea-cliff. A light sea-breeze that smelt of brine, mud and oysters blew towards them. He had put on his hat, raised his shirt collar, buttoned down his cuffs. He wanted to touch her but did not. She gave no indication that she wished to be touched. A curlew cry rose from among the reeds. They watched a marsh-harrier hovering over the saltings, stationary above its prey. As in a dream, everything had meaning. At her entreaty he expounded further on the subject of the Commonwealth poet, Andrew Marvell. He told her which poems she should read, the sort of thing to put into her paper for her supervisor, Professor Faulks.

When they rejoined the picnic, their friends pretended that Alice had come to the wrong tea-party.

'No room! No room!' they cried.

'There's *plenty* of room!' she told them.

They were being silly. Lying against the dunes and each other, full of mutton pie and tea, they laughed at whatever was said, however silly. They had finished the cake.

Winter that year was harsh. Soot smuts lay on the snow on the sill outside the window. He read *Bleak House* in bed with a balaclava on his head, his Civil Defence greatcoat on top of his blankets. It was his final year at the University. Time to knuckle under. Most students had already returned home for Christmas.

'*Giles!*' the voice of his landlady called up from the silence below. 'It's for *you!*'

In the freezing hall on the ground floor he picked up the telephone receiver that lay on its side on the table where Mrs Maggs had placed it.

'Hello?' he said.

'Giles, darling, it's me . . . Can I speak to you?'

'Of course, Allie. Why don't you come round?'

She hummed. For some reason she was unwilling to come round.

'Perhaps we could meet somewhere,' she said.

In a pub, obviously. But the pubs weren't open yet. It was ten o'clock on a Tuesday morning. It was mid-December, trying to snow.

'Why don't we meet in the Roman museum?' he said.

'What Roman museum?'

'The Roman museum in the Longmarket, under Boots the Chemist.'

'I've never seen any Roman museum there – and I go to Boots all the time. Are you sure it's there?

'It's there all right. It's open. It's free.'

'Sounds perfect. Half an hour?

To reach Boots he had to cross the Longmarket. The centre of the city had been badly bombed during the war and replaced by local authority planners with an off-the-peg shopping precinct. The ugliness of the low-cost orthogonal buildings was emphasised by the presence of the medieval cathedral towering over them. In the frozen air – *too cold to snow*, according to Mrs Maggs – the Longmarket, covered by a white layer of ice, was deserted. He reached Boots just as Alice turned the corner.

'Goodness, it's cold!' she said, wrapping him in her arms.

She was wearing a fur-trimmed troika coat that reached the ground, a fur hat and a long kingfisher-blue silk scarf. A strand of blonde hair poked out from under the fur hat. She looked around.

'Well . . .?'

He pushed a nondescript door next to Boots. The door opened onto a stairway that led below ground-level and they descended to a brightly-lit chamber under the shop premises. The tiny museum possessed a single exhibit: a complete, perfectly preserved Roman mosaic floor.

'Oh, my! How marvellous!'

Alice knelt down to examine the tessellation.

'It was discovered in the clear-up after the war,' he explained. 'So we have Goering to thank for it.'

'Such *gorgeous* workmanship – that might have been done yesterday!'

'Seventeen centuries ago, in fact.'

The mosaic, which would have adorned the main room of a wealthy Roman home during the period when the city was a Roman centre of commerce, was a pink geometric rose bordered by a three-stranded guilloche. It had been constructed to puzzle the eye.

'People lived here,' he said. 'Made love, joked, laughed, cried, recited poetry. Then they died.'

' . . . And the poor things thought this, their world, would carry on for ever! Are we like *them*?'

'Archaeologists of the future will find our stuff . . .'

'Stop! You'll make me cry!'

Instead of crying, she stepped into his arms.

'So what's up, Allie? You in a jam or what?'

'I need your help, Giles dear.'

He had never seen her look more lovely.

'You mean there's nobody else around to ask?'

'Don't be horrid.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I need you to deliver something.'

'Can't you deliver it yourself?'

'I can't myself. I'm too . . .'

' . . . Conspicuous?'

'Darling, it's not the sort of situation where you want to turn heads.'  
'And there's no danger of *me* doing that.'  
'It will take half an hour. You go to a pub, give a package to the man who'll approach you. Leave. I'll meet you in the Unicorn afterwards.'  
'Men in pubs don't normally approach men they don't know . . . '  
'You'll be wearing a bright blue scarf.'  
'I see. And the package?'  
She placed into his hand a manila envelope, sealed.  
'A thousand quid in tenners, if you're wondering. Please don't ask any more questions. The less you know the better.'  
'Which pub? What time?'  
'The Curfew in Orchard Street. The public bar. Noon.'  
They exchanged scarves. As he wound hers around his neck he caught a trace of her particular fragrance.  
At noon he was in the public bar of the Curfew in Orchard Street.  
'What bis yur pleasure, Sur?' the girl said.  
*What beist your pleasure?* She wasn't a town girl. She was from a village where they used Elizabethan subjunctives.  
He ordered a pint and sat down on the oak settle next to the open fire. The pub wasn't empty or full. Some workmen in overalls were throwing darts at a board. He kept a look out for a man who looked like a dope dealer – practically every second person. He was jotting down in his notebook the words the girl behind the bar had spoken when a voice said, 'Mind if we sit down here, guv?' Before he could respond, a man had sat down on his right side. As he looked at the man, a second man sat down on his left. They sat, one on either side of him, contemplating their whiskeys on the table in front of them. Both men had shortish hair, longish sideburns. Under their Crombies they were wearing Italian suits, button-down shirts, ties. Neither man spoke. Giles stood up to move to another section of the pub or, perhaps, run out of the door. As he did, the bloke on his left placed a single finger on his arm and gently eased him back onto the bench.  
'Is that yours?' the man said.  
'What?'  
He pointed to Giles's heart.  
'*That!*'  
He lifted open the front of Giles's greatcoat and jutted his chin towards the manila envelope in the inside pocket.  
'Is it yours?'  
Giles said nothing. The man put his hand into his coat and fished out the envelope. He opened it, then ran his thumb over the contents  
'You want to be more careful with your stuff, guv. You don't want to leave it lying about. Some villain might nick it.'  
He placed the envelope in his own inside pocket. Leaving their whiskeys on the table, the men stood up. They buttoned their Crombies against the cold.  
'Here!' One of the two men tossed onto the table a square of black wrapped in cellophane. 'It's Afghani. Good shit. Get yourself stoned.'  
They sauntered out of the pub.

He found Alice in the Unicorn ten minutes later, as arranged. She took his cold hands and warmed them up in her own. She pushed a hot whiskey-and-ginger towards him.

'Darling, you're so sweet to do this for me. I shan't ever forget it.'

He disengaged himself from her embrace. After his encounter in the Curfew he needed to visit the Gents. He needed to be alone for a moment. He didn't know why. When he returned, he handed her the quarter-ounce cut of Afghani, the finest hashish in the world, reputedly.

'They left this.'

'You keep it. I think it was for you.'

'I don't want it. I don't want to be *paid*. I don't want to be paid by *them*!'

They parted outside the Unicorn. Snow was falling, dark against the sky. It was just beginning to settle on the parked cars. Pressing her cheek against his, she murmured, 'Goodbye, darling.'

She didn't return to the university after the Christmas vacation. He never found out why not or what became of her. He didn't want to find out.

At the Unicorn they had forgotten to re-exchange their scarves. For some time hers retained a fugitive trace of her.

The bookshop, which had become quite crowded while the rain persisted, had begun to empty. People were leaving, for the most part with what they had come in with. Giles didn't care. He didn't mind if they thought of a bookshop as a port in a storm.

From the top of the iron staircase he had been able to keep an eye on the customer leafing through the dictionaries in the basement. He had left her to it. Nothing is more irksome than a shopkeeper hustling you when you are trying to make up your mind. When she came back up the stairs she was carrying several books.

'I'll start with these,' she told him. 'I'm sure they won't help me understand anything any better.'

He inspected her selection: Thorne's *Slang Dictionary*. A punky-pink paperback, *Playground Slang*. Fowler's *King's English* – the new facsimile reprint of the 1906 Clarendon edition.

'You'll find Fowler rather stern,' he warned. 'Sound, but a bit dry and bossy, like a good claret.'

'He's just the man for me, then! I need to be *bossed* by dry Mr Fowler!'

Mavis laughed. They all laughed.

'Let me know how you get on,' he said.

'I shall. Thank you so much for your help. And thank you, Mavis, for the tea. I've really enjoyed my visit.'

Mavis, who had bagged up the books, took Alice's payment, which was cash. The dear girl reminded her, as she was leaving the shop, not to forget her umbrella.