

“The Walkover (Act Two)”

An epic in Thirteen Acts, as Dionysus bridges the river Styx.

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(abridged by editor James K Beach)

PART I – DIGRESSION (continued)

Characters in Act Two

Fehmin Ashton

Leon Blackwell

Karen Dashwood

Mourners

Chapel Choir

A Bishop

Cambridge Coach Wollstonecraft

& the

Cambridge Football Team (“The Blues”):

Goalkeeper: Bloomsdale

Defenders: Blue, Carter, Handel, McPherson, Rookwood, Titus

Forwards: Jehovah (sub.), (Rothschild)

Midfielders: (Blackwell,) Brown, Donnoghue, Fowler, Moody, Titan, Warrington

Collective character note: bipolar swing of grandiose sense

of self and low self-esteem; gossip

ACT TWO – After the Funeral

(Motif: a thousand trees; all we are)

On the cinema screen are four mediums: snapshots and phone video, professional college sports footage, a social network album.

Karen Dashwood smiles in full bloom, her cheeks flushed. Leon has an arm around her shoulder and Gareth leans toward her so their heads touch—

Leon takes aim at the goal net, decked in Cambridge blue to an inexpertly held camera in the grainy crowd that cheers him.

Some photographs later he smiles: did he score? A photograph later he is jubilantly embraced by Gareth, wearing the captain's armband.

Footage: The celebratory dance of an elated crowd – he must've scored.

Three images: Karen Dashwood smiling (again), with a girl of vivid golden-blonde bangs sitting beside her, with Leon standing behind them frozen in a laugh, his arms around them.

And then his arms are around Moody and Warrington in the changing rooms of the football team.

Finally his arm is around Fehmin as he points at something beyond the frame of the photograph while she, her attention caught, looks to the other side, out of the frame.

Karen and Mark Dashwood are smartly dressed at an elite gathering, both smiling, with sophisticated drinks. And Gareth and Karen beside them, at ease and totally unaware of the photograph being taken: Leon Blackwell's handiwork maybe. Add a few comments to testify the assumptions, a million likes to follow.

A club with two dozen or so rowdy men and women at the college bar. Leon is in the centre of the blur along with Titan and Brown, all singing a drunken chorus, and others are laughing. Someone speaks in the blur, "Pennying for the drink, please"? To which another replies, "Blackwell pennied"?

An offscreen Sports Commentator interjects with: "In the Cambridge tradition of pennying drink, you have to 'save the queen' (her face is on pennies). So if someone drops a penny in someone's drink they have to down it (drink it all very quickly) so that the Queen does not drown".

On the screen: Raucous laughter as Leon looks around groggily. In one fluid motion he drains his glass then says, "I can predict the year on the penny. But why bother?" Around him counting and chanting builds up to "predict" but Leon keeps drinking until the glass is finished and he catches the coin between his teeth. The crowd: "Predict! Predict!" Leon says: "The year is, 1973!" After a little holdup as it is checked, everyone cheers. Would the pennier stand up please? Brown raises a hand in the air, his cup emptied. Someone fills it. "Drink! Drink!" the chant resumes as Brown murmurs, "You bastard" to Leon and begins draining the cup, the countdown pursuing. Leon loudly declares, "That was the last of his penny. How very clever!" A few people boo and Brown finishes his glass and slams it on the table, richly burping. Brown, Titan and Leon loudly start banging the table.

Sports Commentator (offscreen): "In any dispute over drinking, whichever option involves collectively the most drinking is the option chosen".

On screen: An assortment of pictures, a montage of farewell parties: Leon waving at the crowd, dressed in the regalia of Cambridge blue, standing beside an equally jubilant Gareth with Moody, Warrington and Titan celebrating behind Leon.

Karen in the stands, waving back at him with the crowd around her in celebration.

Fehmin escorted from the stadium by Leon who has one arm around her waist and the other in mid-air as he enthusiastically explains something to her silent smile.

Leon, Gareth and Jehovah on the field in training suits, a football balanced on Jehovah's flexed knee as he and Leon listen to some match talk by Gareth.

Then: A posh dining club: Karen liveried in formality, and a pile of unwrapped presents on the dinner table. "Open it," Leon's voice. She opens a gift and gasps: on silken wrappings there sit, quite snugly, two pearl earrings directly from Vermeer's tell-tale painting—

And then: "Fehmin, wait!" Some pair of footsteps trundle down the flawless marble stairs as she races down, her rich hair deceptive in colour. Leon is quick, and catches up with her: "Please". She embraces him around his neck, her eyes misty.

A photo of the team singing: Gareth with Leon who casually has an arm around him; next to Leon are Brown and then Jehovah, Titan, Bloomsdale, Carter and Blue. In the background, banners proclaiming, "Cambridge versus Sheffield" flutter lazily in the stadium air above a thin knot of people.

The overture ending, everything upturned, as the funeral march has now begun.

ACT TWO - Scene 1

Curtains rise.

A funeral: a chapel, sombre in mourning. MANY MOURNERS sit in the pews, all in black, most of them young; or what is termed archaically as the bloom of youth. Whispers lace the air like a vapid chorale. BROWN sits in the first pew beside A CRYING GIRL and SEVERAL BOYS. Behind Brown, MOODY, ROOKEWOOD, TITAN, WARRINGTON and BLOOMSDALE sit in congregation. Behind them sit JEHOVAH, TITUS, BLUE, CARTER, FOWLER and DONNOHUGHE, and behind them sits the CAMBRIDGE COACH. All have their heads bowed but there are all too many familiar faces and shameless chatter ensues. Even the CHAPEL CHOIR gossips quietly yet animatedly. The modernist term of socializing is very apt; even here. Even now.

Crying Girl: *(a whisper, to Brown)*
"Where is the casket, Uncle Alastair"?

Brown keeps looking at the altar as he replies:

Brown:

“Gareth’s loved ones will bring it very soon”.

A Woman with a Bun at her nape leans forward in her pew to address the people sitting in front, who turn as she whispers:

Woman-with-bun:

“He seemed all right a few days ago when Cambridge played Sheffield, no? How did he die”?

Boy-with-mad-genius:

“A car crash. Died in the hospital a few days later... Had internal injuries”.

A Small Child sidles up behind the Woman with the bun, intrigued by her hair. He timidly reaches for a coin from the bun, plucks it out, and finds another coin, then another. The cinema screen shows this strange activity in detail.

Man-beside-woman-with-bun: *(amused, he pats the Small Child’s head)*

“Greatest captain to have ever led Cambridge”.

Noticing the child with fingers in her hair, the Woman whirls around. Her bun loosens and all remaining coins in the bun clatter to the floor. The Small Child drops his handful of coins and flees.

Woman-with-bun:

“My spells”...

Man-beside-woman-with-bun: *(ignoring the coins)*

“The most decent and sorted man I ever knew”.

Bespectacled Boy:

“True that”.

Boy-with-mad-genius:

“I don’t think he was drunk. Speeding, perhaps, but not drunk”.

They continue to speculate in hisses, crackling like wildfire consuming a forest.

Warrington looks up from his subdued reflections and asks Moody:

Warrington:

“Chief mourners”?

Moody:

“Blackwell is, of course, and Rothschild’s girlfriend. Both his parents are dead. No immediate family members, just distant ones from here and there. I think they are sitting over there”...

He points at a Group of Middle-aged People occupying three front rows in the opposite column of pews. Warrington stares at them for some time, perhaps trying to come up with some opinion about them.

Warrington:

“It is odd though. Wouldn’t – Shouldn’t he be buried beside his parents or family graveyard or some such”?

Moody:

“He will be eventually – I don’t know” –

Warrington:

“So Blackwell – Leon, and Gareth, they had been friends their whole lives”?

Moody:

“Most of their lives, I think it is appropriate to say. And yes, that is the talk” –

The BISHOP enters, dressed in formal black. Silence descends like an apostolic revelation over the crowd. A few moments later, an open casket is wheeled inside the chapel and all the guests stand up in reverence and respect. GARETH lies inside, his eyes closed. A gash on the forehead has been rendered presentable for viewing. As his coffin passes through the aisle, people now are truly sobered seeing his dead form. This gliding spectre is followed by LEON, KAREN, and behind these two, FEHMIN. The latter causes a fresh wave of whispered unrest in the hallowed silence of the coffin vicinity.

Titus: (to Moody)

“Blackwell’s girlfriend? But why”?

Titan looks aloft, the question balanced at the tip of his own tongue.

Moody:

“She was Rothschild’s cousin. Didn’t you know”?

Leon leads Karen after the gliding coffin, his head bowed. Karen is white-faced, her jaw set, her eyes fixed at the dead Gareth, so stoic save for the measured stride that she appears to be like the many stone effigies that deck the chapel walls. Fehmin is puffy-eyed. This singular procession reaches the altar where the coffin is set. The chief mourners take their reserved places in the front pew. Others shuffle back to their seats as the bishop takes over the proceedings.

Bishop:

“We are gathered here to observe the funeral rites of our friend, and colleague and blood kin, Gareth Morgan Rothschild, son of Ezra Crassus Rothschild, who departed this world on August the 26th of this year”.

The Bishop clears his throat.

“I will not go to the Bible, to the Book of Mormon, nor to the Book of Doctrine and Covenants for my text. On this occasion I will say, ‘Know ye not that there is a prince

and a great man fallen this day in Israel?’ (2 Samuel 3:38). King David's comment about Abner captured in a few words the feeling of the people whenever a beloved leader died. Robert B. Thompson quoted these words at the funeral of Joseph Smith Sr. on 15 September 1840 and here I quote them once more”.

A few mourners cough quietly.

“And from Job, chapter 19: 25-6, I quote, ‘For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God’”...

The Chapel Choir begins to joyfully sing, perhaps “Hymn of the Church of Latter Day Saints” by Gordon Hinckley and G. Homer Durham.

Meanwhile the Bishop concludes with:

Bishop:

“MY REDEEMER LIVES”!

After the Chapel Choir concludes its hymn, the Bishop retakes to enlighten the gathering with the last well-chosen words on Atonement and Resurrection as Gareth sleeps on, the resurrection unheeded, the atonement woe bygone.

Bishop:

“Death is only the beginning of the greater Grace that we souls crave for in life. Death is be all, not the end all of all. Gareth Rothschild to die so young only conveys more fully the sense of the afterlife that awaits us all: The Greater path, the other being”.

The Bishop pauses in adoration of this notion.

“Mourning over death is paradoxical. We do not weep and mourn as those who have no hope. We give way to faith in God and in His eternal, merciful plan. I would conclude with Gareth Rothschild’s much cherished verse: ‘Follow in the footsteps of your husband and father, excepting wherein he may have manifested the weaknesses of the flesh’. Amen”.

The Mourners echo “Amen” as they get up from their chairs, crowding towards Leon and Karen or loudly inquiring about the burial and the graveside service. Some casually stroll in the garden where funeral refreshments are decked. The football team consoles Leon and Karen. A few people linger on out of sheer curiosity. But in the end, too soon the inevitable is achieved: the chapel is cleared.

ACT TWO - Scene 2

Grad Café on Mill Lane. PATRONS come and go. LEON and FEHMIN sit at a table in the corner, books interspersed by cups of steaming Italian coffee. Fehmin pores over a tablet, then studies a smart phone, sipping coffee. Leon, lost in thought, stares at the opposite wall; he clicks his pen every then and now. He is unkempt and unshaven for days: an iconic impersonation of someone in grief. Both of them are dressed in black, still, their grief evident.

Suddenly speaking to no one in particular:

Leon:

“When you are friends with someone for as long as your whole life, perhaps, then your own life ALONE ceases to have a meaning.

“You see, if there is one thing Gareth Rothschild showed me, it is that I, Leon Blackwell, have no life that can exist without him. Everything we did had to be together. Why do people do that? We have been taught life is transient and so on so - why do people do that, still? Pathetic weaklings ” –

He takes his head in his hands.

“All things that I ever did were a ‘joint venture’ with him - *our* things, never *my* things. So, what I am saying is that I have no identity” ...

Fehmin:

“I am sure that’s not true, Leon” –

Leon: *(continuing, louder)*

...“Such that it is quite some time since he left and I still don’t have a damn idea about what to do”.

People in the vicinity go quiet: he might have spoken loud, arguably, but they were eavesdropping: the frailty of the mob.

Fehmin:

“Leon, please” –

He stares at her with a challenge in his eyes, daring her to say something else. She looks away.

Fehmin:

“It’s just – I am sure Gareth would have wanted you to move on. This – is not what Gareth would have wanted” –

He gives a sardonic laugh - not a laugh exactly.

Leon:

“Oh and you know what Gareth would have wanted” –

They stare at one another: another challenge proclaimed.

“I know, Fehmin that you have a knack of thinking that you are privy to secrets that you are not, but this is just stretching the truth beyond the breaking point”.

Fehmin thumbs through then closes a leatherbound book.

Fehmin:

“It didn’t work, Leon. It did not make me angry and it certainly is not going to keep me away from the case”.

Leon shrugs and pushes everything lying open in front of him away, moodily: the challenge is lost?

“Gareth is gone, Leon. The sooner you accept this” –

Leon:

“You know what I am thinking right now? You were his cousin, weren’t you? Gareth Rothschild’s cousin, so there can be no mistake. So why did he hate you so much?”

The last words said venomously, almost spat to her face. She clenches her fist to bite back a retort: an old reflex? Her face is white but whether in anger or fury or fear cannot be determined.

“He just put up with you because of me. You know that, right? Just because of me – proving once again, HOW HE WAS RIGHT AND I WAS NOT” –

The last words, indeed, in comparison, are roared. Leon stands up and so does Fehmin, once again suspended in a deadlock of defiance and challenge.

A group of people troop from the door toward their table, dressed from a football practice, very tentatively, which is tantamount: BROWN, MOODY, WARRINGTON.

In walks KAREN DASHWOOD. Modestly composed, she looks dazed, possibly on drugs, surely traumatized by the loss of Gareth. She is searching for something lost, or several lost items; life has handed her a macabre mystery.

Warrington breaks from his group with “Give me a minute, mates” and approaches her. He is somewhat drunk on alcohol or on power. The other football players await him from a distance as he approaches Karen.

Warrington:

“Karen Dashwood! I’d like to be first to introduce myself as the new team captain. My intentions are to honor Gareth’s playbook, yet I do have a few new ideas of my own to implement on the field. I hope you are copacetic with this”.

Karen attempts a smile, placing it over her revulsion for Warrington.

Karen:

“I do miss him terribly. Thank you. But this”...

She gestures limply at the collegiate café hoopla around her.

“This is all too much too soon”...

Warrington:

“Say, Karen, did I see your brother Mark at the funeral? No. I wonder why. At any rate I have something to discuss with him” –

A terrified look enters her glassy eyes.

Karen:

“Mark is... missing”...

Warrington:

“Missing? Missing, how? Under what circumstances? Does this have something to do with that cult, that cult he allegedly joined” –

Karen: *(brightening)*

“My brother will turn up. He’s been known to take vacations from responsibility.”

Warrington:

“Yes. By the way, when I said I was the new captain, I did mean to convey that I can replace Gareth in any capacity.”

Karen: *(nearly a sob)*

“Oh!”

Karen runs toward the door, past where Fehmin is engaged in a stare-down with Leon. She pretends to not notice them, despite Fehmin’s perfunctory wave of hello, and exits the café.

Meanwhile, Warrington nods to himself and heads toward Leon, where Brown and Moody stand at the ready, following through on a plan of attack against Leon. Feeling Warrington’s elbow at his side, Brown springs into action.

Brown:

“Coach needs to see you, Leon”.

Moody:

“You should talk to him, Leon”.

Warrington:

“Why were you absent from the meeting he called up today”?

Leon:

“I don’t think I am answerable to you, Warrington, so you can clear off and tell the Coach from me that the tournament” –

Warrington:

“Oh and I don’t think I am your messenger boy either, not anymore” –

Moody:

“Careful, Blackwell. Warrington is your captain now”.

An uneasy silence diffuses.

Leon:

“So you think you can take Gareth’s place, do you”?

Warrington: *(getting angrier)*

“Yes. Yes, I think I can”.

Brown steps in between Warrington and Leon, facing Warrington, perhaps to balance out Moody who, arms crossed, stands glaring at Leon behind Warrington.

Brown:

“Hey – Warrington – hey – stop” –

He turns to Leon, a true mediator.

“Leon, the coach needs to see you, NOW”.

Leon:

“I have no desire to see him. Tell him that, if you please”.

He turns and begins to pack his books and things, taking a last unnecessary swig from his coffee: the gesture is cliché. Fehmin rises to stand at his side.

Moody:

“Or perhaps the tournament would be better off if you just hand in your resignation and save us the debacle Rothschild created in the last match against Sheffield” –

Brown:

“Moody” –

Leon:

“Oh really? A 5-0 victory suddenly appears to be a debacle to Cambridge” –

Moody:

“And thanks to Rothschild we did”?

Leon:

“You bastard” –

He moves toward Moody. Fehmin grabs his arm, yelling, "LEON, NO". Brown stands in front of Moody while Warrington holds his arm in restraint.

Enter TITUS and ROOKEWOOD, who are flanking the CAMBRIDGE COACH (a.k.a. Wollstonecraft). The Coach appears fully aware of what he has interrupted, and yet looks as if he might have just wandered in by mistake.

Cambridge Coach:

"Leon, in my office, please"...

A vacuum in the eye of the storm prevails. Leon wrenches his arm from Fehmin's grasp, where she has held on faithfully.

Leon: (to Fehmin)

"You stay out of this".

Leon storms out, the door swinging, followed by the Coach, then Titus and Rookewood. Moody frees himself from Warrington's grasp and follows, straightening his shirt almost emphatically: an old action, overdone.

An awkward silence prevails as Fehmin collects her books and things. Brown turns to her while Warrington shuffles uneasily in his wake.

Brown:

"I'll help you with this" –

Fehmin:

"It's all right. I can manage".

As she is moving on, Brown remembers himself once more.

Brown:

"I am sorry".

She turns.

"Gareth – I heard he was your cousin – His death – I am sorry" –

She dithers where she turned: about to cry? Only dips her head in acknowledgement.

Fehmin:

"That's very kind of you to say".

Brown:

"We should go out for a drink sometime, Fehmin. Someplace far from campus, where we can socialize discreetly."

Fehmin:

"I don't drink, Alastair."

Brown:

“Which are you: a recovering alcoholic, or a Muslim?”

Fehmin:

“Thank you and good night”.

Fehmin fumbles with the books a moment and then heads toward the exit, the door swinging like a metronome behind.

Brown:

“I bet she drinks. The liar. Everybody drinks.”

The remaining patrons break off into bunches of conversation, their voices muted, trance-like, self-directed, each character detaching from the crowd.

ACT TWO - Scene 3

The office of Cambridge Coach Wollstonecraft: a table in the centre with several mismatched chairs, a sofa dumped in the corner, though quite well kept. Football posters line the well-lit walls and a tidy shelf in one corner is filled with football books. A few souvenir Cambridge kits line one part of the wall behind a glass case. Below this glassed display is a writing table covered with pamphlets, a few field drawings, drunk-from paper cups and such natural assortments.

JEHOVAH is seated on the sofa, absorbed in some sporting trivia off an influential magazine. LEON storms in, and goes off to stand in front of the Coach's shelf, fiddling with his book collection.

Jehovah:

“Gareth was an exceptional person, truly”.

Leon:

“I think no one knows it better than I do”.

Jehovah:

“Yeah.

I am not sure if anyone has told you – but Wollstonecraft signed me as the new – um, forward”.

Leon puts a random book back into the shelf.

Leon:

“You mean you have taken Gareth’s vacant position now. Your moment of glory, I presume. Moving from the reserves to the starting XI right in the middle of the tournament– tell me how it feels. I would never know, since I have never been a reserve”.

Jehovah:

“You associate very poor morals with people, I think”.

The CAMBRIDGE COACH enters huffily, looking as usual. Whether he heard this exchange between the two is unclear.

Cambridge Coach:

“Ah, Leon– and Cabel, of course. Yes, Cabel, everything is settled and I will see you first thing in the morning. Off you go”.

Jehovah smiles at him and leaves, closing the door behind him. Leon stands narrow-eyed and fixating on the spot where Jehovah stood.

Cambridge Coach:

“Sit”!

Leon looks at him, sinks into a chair lying close to the writing desk. Wollstonecraft picks up a book from his table on pretext of looking for something: doesn’t find it, but does realize what book he has in his hands.

Cambridge Coach:

“You know what book this is? It is the official football ‘Laws of the Game’. You or anyone else on my team has never read it, and yet you know everything it says. Cambridge was the first to form the official association football rules in 1848, and had we not digressed to rugby, Sheffield United would not have gone down in history as the first ever football club”.

Leon’s brow furrows.

“I see I got your attention. You did not know this. And yet someone like your girlfriend” –

Leon:

“Fehmin” –

Cambridge Coach:

“Fehmin would know this piece of history. And yet you are the one who can play and not her, proving that one does not need to adhere to the past to live in the present”.

An easy silence stretches between them as Leon stares at a framed photograph on Wollstonecraft’s desk: a woman, middle aged, smiling eyes. The Coach then following his gaze fixates on the photograph for some seconds – he picks it up.

Cambridge Coach:

“My wife, Julia – God rest her soul. She died of terminal cancer five years ago. That was when I thought everything I was would cease to exist. She was my childhood sweetheart to begin with and then later on, the love of my life. All my pupils called her ‘mother’ and she cooked for the entire team on some odd Sunday or the other. You didn’t know her, of course”.

Leon:

“I am sorry”.

Cambridge Coach:

“That’s what everyone told me when she died. It hurt even more badly when they did that, even made me mad at times. How could they know? But eventually I learnt that everyone meant well”.

Leon:

“How did you then get out of it”?

Cambridge Coach:

“I didn’t. You can’t. Even to this day there are times when I want nothing but our morning walks together. But I learnt that there is no way you can stop until, of course, you stop”.

Leon lets the Coach’s words wash over him, like an embalming wave. Relativity is a trajectory sometimes a tangent.

Wollstonecraft puts her picture back on his desk.

“I would understand if you will not want to play the tournament out. But if you do, then make sure it is what you really want to do, not some misplaced aspirations or expectations”.

Leon nods and stands.

Leon:

“Can I leave now, Coach”?

Cambridge Coach:

“I think, yes”.

Leon:

“I will play the tournament out”.

Cambridge Coach:

“I insist you take more time than that”.

Leon nods once more, and makes to leave but turns on an afterthought.

Leon:

“I almost forgot. Is there a chance I might get the contents of Gareth’s locker once it is emptied”?

Wollstonecraft's face falls morosely – abruptly.

Cambridge Coach:

“But Gareth emptied his locker the night we played Sheffield. Came down and handed me the keys. I am sorry but I thought you knew that already”.

Leon's expression is unreadable as he walks out. The Coach thought he heard him say, “But I didn't”.

Curtains fall.

End of Act Two.