

Your main commentary should be focused on *ellipsis*. Other topics may also be addressed.

He swept me forward into the dining-room. The club steward, no doubt familiar with Widmerpool's predispositions, indicated a table by the window, flanked on one side by two yellow-faced men conversing in stilted, sing-song French: on the other, by an enormously fat old fellow who was opening his luncheon with dressed crab and half a bottle of hock. One of the men talking French I thought I recognised as the Balkan diplomatist seen at the Jeavonses and said to be of Prince Theodoric's entourage.

"Have anything you like to eat or drink," said Widmerpool. "Consult the menu here. Personally I am on a diet - a little gastric trouble - and shall restrict myself to cold tongue and a glass of water."

He handed me the card, and I ordered all I decently could in the face of this frugality.

"You are still - publishing - advertising - ?" he asked. "Was it not something of the sort?"

His manner of asking personal questions was of that kind not uncommonly to be found which is completely divorced from any interest in the answer. He was always prepared to embark on a lengthy cross-examination of almost anyone he might meet, at the termination of which - apart from such details as might chance to concern himself - he had absorbed no more about the person interrogated than he knew at the outset of the conversation. At the same time this process seemed somehow to gratify his own egotism.

"I was in publishing. Art books. Now it is the film business."

"Indeed? What unusual ways you choose to earn a living. Not acting, surely?"

"Hardly. I am on what is called the 'scenario side'. I help to write that part of the programme known as the 'second feature'. For every foot of American film shown in this country, a proportionate length of British film must appear. The Quota, in fact."

"Ah, yes, the Quota, the Quota," said Widmerpool, cutting short any further explanation, which would certainly have been tedious enough.

"Well, I never expected to sit at the same table as host of a man who wrote films for the Quota. Do you like the work?"

"Not greatly."

"It may lead to something better. If you are industrious, you get on. That is true of all professions, even the humblest. You will probably end up in Hollywood, or somewhere like that. But tell me, do you still

see those friends of yours, Stringham and Templer?"

40 "Stringham I haven't seen since the night he got so tight, and you and I helped to put him to bed. I rang up a day or two later and found he had gone abroad. From what I hear, he is drinking enough to float a battleship. There was even a question of taking a cure."

"And Templer?"

45 "I see him occasionally. Not for rather a long time, as it happens. You know his marriage broke up?"

"Like Stringham's," said Widmerpool. "Your friends do not seem very fortunate in their matrimonial ventures. I run across Templer sometimes in the City. We have even done a little business together."

50 "I was able to fix up a job for Bob Duport, that rather disreputable brother-in-law of his."

"So I heard."

"Oh, he told you, did he?" said Widmerpool, gratified at this action of his being so widely known. "I believe there were various repercussions from that good turn I was able to do him. For instance, Duport was living apart from his wife. He had behaved rather badly, so people say. When he got this job, the two of them patched things up again, and she went back to him. I was glad to have been the cause of that. We all three had dinner together. Rather an odd woman. Moody, I should think. She didn't seem particularly pleased at the reunion. Not at all grateful to me, at least."

60 "Why not?"

"I couldn't say. She hardly spoke a word throughout the course of an extremely good dinner at the Savoy. I may say it cost me quite a lot of money. Not that I grudge it. They are in South America now, I believe. Did you ever meet either of them?"

65 "Met him once with Templer when I was an undergraduate."

"And her?"

"I knew her a bit. In fact I first met her ages ago when I stayed with the Templers. Peter's father was still alive then."

70 "Not unattractive."

"No."

"Quite elegant in her way too."

"Yes."

75 "Too good for Duport, I should have thought."

"Possibly."