

Veneers

To those who gawped at his block-boned head and obelisk height, Jambo was pure hoodlum. And yet, as he aimed arrow-true punches at the non payers, late payers and short payers, he would think of the theatre play he had appreciated the night before and smile. Or when easing a knife between the ribs of a local snitch, he hoped that week's novel would maintain its tension to the climax and not flitter and fuss into a vague outcome where he, the loyal reader, would have to guess the ending.

"There's nothing wrong with culture," he had explained to Mad Mahoney. "Life can't only be about screwing the poor."

"Culture?" Mad Mahoney glottal-stopped the word, flagging up the crudeness beneath his slick suit and black-rimmed glasses. "You have your culture, Jambo, but remember, it's dog eat dog out there. And we top dogs get rid of the scum dogs."

Tonight, thought Jambo, starring as scum dog is Eddie, a minor character who possesses the gnat-like tendencies to always be where he shouldn't.

It was imagining himself playing a part that saw Jambo through the daily butchery. Sometimes he turned critic: *We see before us a helter-skelter chase on foot before Eddie is apprehended and pleads for mercy in a communal back-green full of washing. Jambo grants clemency in return for four fingers. The digit-removing scene is poignant, for Jambo remembers that Eddie can go some on the pub piano.*

"You listening, baw-bag?" Mad Mahoney was hissing. "Job done, let's stop fanning around."

But Jambo was staring at his hand, entranced by the knife it held, scarlet from Eddie's dismemberment and wet like a tongue.

“If you were a dog, Eddie,” he whispered to the cringing figure before him, “you would be a poodle.” He switched his glance to Mad Mahoney. “And if you were a dog you’d be put down.”

Mad Mahoney’s sneer froze. All energy transferred to the upper part of his face – his eyes, already bulged by thick lenses, grew rounder. His ears unfurled to pick through the meaning of the words and finally, when the light-bulbs popped, he reached for his knife. ‘What the...?’

‘You are a man of no empathy and little purpose. You are the worst scum of all.’

Mad Mahoney cacked out a one-syllable laugh before gritting out, ‘Eddie, take your fingers and piss off. I’ve a cutting-up job of my own to do.’

Eddie skittered away clutching his digits, deaf to Jambo’s suggestion of getting the hospital to sew them back on – it would be a shame to waste those piano lessons.

Mad Mahoney circled Jambo. He sniffed once, twice, then pounced with a low growl.

But Jambo was ready. Teeth bared, he leapt forward to meet Mahoney. Mahoney’s ending would be guillotine-sharp and satisfying – no guessing required.