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JOHN COLLIER

Pictures in the Fire

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Interpretation of a Dream

A YOUNG man entered the office of a well-known psychiatrist, whom he addressed as follows: 'Doctor, save me!'

'By all means,' responded the mind specialist suavely. 'After all, that is what I am here for.'

'But you can't,' cried the young man distractedly. 'You can't! You can't! Nothing can save me!'

'At all events,' said the psychiatrist soothingly, 'it will do no harm to talk it over.'

With that he waved his hands a little, smiled with a rather soapy and ingratiating expression, and before he knew it the young man was seated in a deep armchair, with his face to the light, pouring out his story.

'My name,' said he, 'is Charles Rotifer. I am employed in the office of an accountant, who occupies the top storey of this sky-scraper. I am twenty-eight years of age, single, engaged to be married. My fiancée is the best and dearest girl in the world, beautiful as an angel, and with lovely golden hair. I mention this because it is relevant to my story.'

'It is indeed,' said the psychiatrist. 'Gold is a symbol of money. Have you a rententive attitude towards money? For example, you say you are employed in an office. Have you saved anything considerable out of your salary?'

'Yes, I have,' replied the young man. 'I've saved quite a bit.'

'Please continue, Mr. Rotifer,' said the psychiatrist, benevolently. 'You were speaking of your fiancée. Later on I shall have to ask you one or two rather intimate questions on that subject.'

'And I will answer them,' returned the young man. 'There is nothing in our relationship that needs to be concealed—at all events from a psychologist. All is complete harmony between us, and there is nothing about her that I could wish altered, except perhaps her little habit of gesturing rather too freely as she speaks.'

'I will make a note of that,' said the other, scribbling on his pad.

'It is not of the least importance,' said the young man. 'I hardly know why I mentioned it, except to indicate how perfect she is. But, Doctor, thirty-eight nights ago I dreamed a dream.'

'Thirty-eight, indeed!' observed the mind doctor, jotting down the figure. 'Tell me frankly, when you were an infant, did you by any chance have a nurse, a teacher or a female relative, on whom perhaps you might have had a little fixation, who happened to be thirty-eight years of age?'

'No, Doctor,' said the young man, 'but there are thirty-nine floors to this skyscraper.'

The psychiatrist gave him a penetrating glance. 'And does the form and height of this building suggest anything to you?'

'All I know,' said the young man obstinately, 'is that I dreamed I was outside the window of our office at the top, in the air, falling.'

'Falling!' said the psychiatrist, raising his eyebrows. 'And what were your sensations at that moment?'

'I was calm,' replied the young man. 'I imagine I was falling at the normal rate, but my mind seemed to work very fast. I had leisure to reflect, to look around me. The view was superb. In a moment I had reached the ornamental stone-work which separates our windows from those immediately below. Then I woke up.'

'And that simple, harmless, perfectly ordinary little dream has been preying on your mind?' asked the psychiatrist in a jocular tone. 'Well, my dear sir——'

'Wait a moment,' said his visitor. 'On the following night I dreamed the same dream, or rather, a continuation of it. There I was, spread-eagled in mid-air—like this—passing the ornamental stone-work, looking into the window of the floor below, which is also occupied by our firm. I saw my friend, Don Straker, of our tax department, bending over his desk. He looked up. He saw me. His face took on an expression of the utmost astonishment. He made a movement as if to rise from his seat, no doubt to rush to the window. But compared with mine, his movements were indescribably slow. I remember thinking, "He will be too

late." Then I dropped below his window, and down to the dividing line between that floor and the next. As I did so, I woke.'

'Well,' said the brain doctor. 'What have we here? The dream of one night is resumed on the night following. That is a very ordinary occurrence.'

'Possibly,' said the young man. 'However, on the next night, there I was, having just passed the dividing line between that floor and the floor below it. I had slipped into a recumbent posture, with one leg slightly raised, like this.'

'Yes, yes,' said the psychiatrist, 'I see. It is not necessary to demonstrate. You nearly knocked over my ash-tray.'

'I'm sorry,' said the young man. 'I'm afraid I have picked up the habit from Maisie. Maisie is my fiancée. When she wants to say how she did a thing, she just shows you. She acts it out. It was the night she told me how she slipped and fell on the icy pavement on Seventy-second Street, that we became engaged. Well, as I say, there I was, falling past another floor, looking about me in all directions. The hills of New Jersey looked magnificent. A high-flying pigeon coasted in my direction, and regarded me with a round eye, devoid of any expression whatsoever. Then he banked and sheered off. I could see the people in the street below, or rather their hats, jammed as closely as black pebbles on a beach. Even as I looked, one or two of those black pebbles suddenly turned white. I realized I was attracting attention.'

'Tell me this,' said the psychiatrist. 'You seem to have had a good deal of time for thought. Did you recollect why you were falling; whether you had thrown yourself, or slipped, or what?'

'Doctor, I really don't know,' said the young man. 'Not unless my last dream, which I had last night, sheds any light on the matter. Most of the time I was just looking around, falling faster all the time, of course, but thinking faster to make up for it. Naturally I tried to think of subjects of importance, seeing it was my last opportunity. Between the seventeenth and the sixteenth floors, for example, I thought a lot about democracy and the world crisis. It seemed to me that where most people are making a big mistake is——'

'Perhaps for the moment, we had better keep to the experience itself,' said the brain doctor.

'Well,' said the young man, 'at the fifteenth floor I looked in at the window, and, really, I never believed such things happened! Not in offices, anyway. And, Doctor, next day I paid a visit to the fifteenth floor here, just out of curiosity. And those offices are occupied by a theatrical agent. Doctor, don't you think that confirms my dream?'

'Calm yourself,' said the psychiatrist. 'The names of all the firms in this building are listed on the wall directory on the main floor. You no doubt retained an unconscious memory which you adroitly fitted into your dream.'

'Well, after that,' said the young man, 'I began to look down a good deal more. I'd take just a quick glance into each window as I passed, but mostly I was looking downwards. By this time there were big patches of white among the dark, pebble-like hats below. In fact, pretty soon they were clearly distinguishable as hats and faces. I saw two taxi-cabs swerve towards one another and collide. A woman's scream drifted up out of the confused murmur below. I felt I agreed with her. I was in a reclining posture, and already I felt an anticipatory pain in the parts that would touch the ground first. So I turned my face downwards—like this—but that was horrible. So I put my feet down, but then they hurt. I tried to fall head first, to end it sooner, but that didn't satisfy me. I kept on twisting and turning—like this!'

'Please relax,' said the psychiatrist. 'There is no need to demonstrate.'

'I'm sorry,' said the young man. 'I picked up the habit from Maisie.'

'Sit down,' said the psychiatrist, 'and continue.'

'Last night,' said the young man despairingly, 'was the thirty-eighth night.'

'Then,' said the psychiatrist, 'you must have got down to this level, for this office is on the mezzanine floor.'

'I had,' cried the young man. 'And I was outside this very window, descending at terrific speed. I looked in. Doctor, I saw you! As clearly as I see you now!'

'Mr. Rotifer,' replied the psychiatrist with a modest smile, 'I very frequently figure in my patients' dreams.'

'But I wasn't your patient then,' said the young man. 'I didn't even know you existed. I didn't know till this morning, when

I came to see who occupied this office. Oh, Doctor, I was so relieved to find you were not a theatrical agent!'

'And why were you relieved?' asked the specialist blandly.

'Because you were not alone. In my dream, I mean. A young woman was with you. A young woman with beautiful golden hair. And she was sitting on your knee, Doctor, and her arms were around your neck. I felt certain it was another theatrical agency. And then I thought, "That is very beautiful golden hair. It is like my Maisie's hair." At that moment you both looked toward the window. It was she! Maisie! My own Maisie!'

The psychiatrist laughed very heartily. 'My dear sir,' said he, 'you may set your mind entirely at rest.'

'All the same,' said the young man, 'this morning, in the office, I have been a prey to an unbearable curiosity, an almost irresistible urge to jump, just to see what I should see.'

'You would have had the mortification,' said the psychiatrist, 'of seeing that there were no grounds whatever for your rash act. Your fiancée is not a patient of mine; therefore she could not have had one of those harmless little transferences, as we call them, which have been known to lead to ardent behaviour on the part of the subject. Besides, our profession has its ethics, and nothing ever happens in the office. No, my dear sir, what you have described to me is a relatively simple condition, a recurrent dream, a little neurotic compulsion—nothing that cannot be cured in time. If you can visit me three or four times a week, I am confident that a very few years will show a decided improvement.'

'But Doctor,' cried the young man in despair, 'I am due to hit the ground at any moment!'

'But only in a dream,' said the psychiatrist reassuringly. 'Be sure to remember it clearly, and note particularly if you bounce. Meanwhile, return to your office, carry on with your work, and worry as little as possible about it.'

'I will try to do so,' said the young man. 'But really you are astonishingly like yourself as I saw you in my dream, even to that little pearl tie-pin.'

'That,' said the psychiatrist, as he bowed him smilingly out, 'was a gift from a very well-known lady, who was always falling in her dreams.' So saying, he closed the door behind his visitor,

who departed shaking his head in obstinate melancholy. The psychiatrist then seated himself at his desk and placed the tips of his fingers together, as psychiatrists always do while they are meditating upon how much a new patient may be good for.

His meditation was interrupted by his secretary, who thrust her head in at the door. 'Miss Mimling to see you,' she said. 'Her appointment is at two-thirty.'

'Show her in,' said the psychiatrist, and rose to greet the new entrant, who proved to be a young woman with the appearance of a rather wild mouse, upon whose head someone has let fall a liberal splash of peroxide. She was in a very agitated state. 'Oh, Doctor,' she said, 'I just *had* to telephone you, for when I saw your name in the book, of course I knew it was you. I saw your name on the door. In my dream, Doctor. In my dream.'

'Let us talk it over very quietly,' said the healer of souls, trying to manœuvre her into the deep armchair. She was fidgety, however, and perched herself upon the corner of his desk. 'I don't know if you think there is anything *in* dreams,' she said, 'but this was such an extraordinary one.'

'I dreamed I came up to your door, and there was your name on it, just as it is out there. That's how it was I came to look you up in the telephone book, and there it was again. So I felt I just *had* to come and see you.

'Well, I dreamed I came into your office, and I was sitting here on the desk, just like this, talking to you, and all of a sudden—of course I know it was only a dream—I felt a feeling . . . well, really I hardly know how to tell you. It seemed to me as if you were my father, my big brother, and a boy I once knew called Herman Myers, all rolled into one. I don't know how I could feel like that, even in a dream, for I am engaged to a young man I love with all my conscious mind, and I thought with my unconscious, too. Oh, it's awful of me!'

'My dear young lady,' purred the psychiatrist, 'this is nothing more or less than the phenomenon of transference. It is something which can happen to anybody, and usually it does.'

'Yes,' said she, 'but it made me transfer myself to your knee, like this, and put my arms around your neck, like this.'

'Now! now!' murmured the psychiatrist gently. 'I'm afraid you are acting out a neurotic impulse.'

'I always act things out,' she said. 'They say it makes me the life and soul of a party. But, Doctor, then I happened to look out of the window, like this, and . . . Wow! There he is! There he was! It was Charlie! Oh, what a terrible look he gave us as he went by!'

And Who, With Eden . . .

'You marry the mental age of ten, and you end up being a bedroom steward on a blasted Noah's ark.' Mr. Jenson muttered this bitter conclusion to a toucan, whose cage he was resentfully cleaning out. He even gave the well-beaked bird a push with his scraper, to move it to the far end of its perch, so that he could scrape.

Other cages, of all shapes and sizes, stood around what was incorrectly called the *patio*. These, the warm wind advised him, were also in need of cleaning. Otherwise—no beer!

Mr. Jensen, when he proposed marriage to a lady as young in mind as he described, had looked forward confidently to control of the exchequer. He had failed entirely to take notice of the attitude of small girls to their pennies. From this it may be inferred that theirs was no mismating, mentally, of May and December. It might better have been described as a March-April marriage in I.Q., though it was a ripe September union in terms of A.D.

What Mr. Jensen had referred to as a Noah's Ark had been called, by the real-estate man, a Spanish-style bungalette. The term, though harsh, was not altogether unjust. It was one of a straggle of its kind, littered like a tide-mark between the listless levels of swamp and sea on an inexpensive-looking beach in mid-Florida. Their architecture, which would have harmonized with few landscapes, harmonized with this one. Both offered an illusion of attractiveness which evaporated suddenly and without trace, so there was no telling who or what had taken one in. Years ago, when this development was dreamed up, slapped together and sold off, the Jensens, pale and blinking from the north, gazing dazedly around at sunshine and sea-shine, had declared it to be quite a picture. Myra had not long signed upon the dotted line when Mr. Jensen, though he was not in the very least an artist, felt obscurely that he could have done better himself. It is probable that, given a certain facility, he would

have done exactly the same thing. Everything was executed in those pastel colours which are at once obvious and unbelievable. There were long, vague, horizontal smears of blues and yellows and pinks, fretted here and there by the easily drawn palmetto, and enlivened by the all too simple pelican, a cute touch, but one which soon loses its appeal.

When these weak and leaky pleasure-boxes were first run up, three coconut palms and a bougainvillea had been planted in each skimpy lot. The purpose was, to provide glamour. This objective had not been achieved. After ten years, the beach colony looked cheaper than ever and, even more distressing, it was no longer cheap at all. The Jensens had been washed up there on the tepid wave of Myra's low fixed income; that pillowing billow had sunk beneath them, and now, like stranded jellyfish, they found it uncomfortable to remain and impossible to depart.

Mr. Jensen longed desperately to depart. He longed for Brooklyn. It may be observed of nostalgia that, the less agreeable its object, the more valid and the more excruciating its pang. Mr. Jensen frequently said he wanted a real saloon and a decent delicatessen, but the howling within and the physical pain in his chest were oftenest evoked by an idea of the grimy wind blowing off the Hudson and the expectorations frozen on the sidewalks.

Sometimes he experienced a species of olfactory mirage; he seemed to snuff up again the snug fume of the one-Swede apartment house, where he, as doorman, elevator man and janitor, had been the one Swede. Myra, new-widowed of her builder, cut off in more or less his youth, before he had had time to make the builder's post-war pile, had come there with her low fixed income, and there Mr. Jensen had wooed, and won and married her for it. Now, possibly for want of petting, that warm-hearted woman had taken intemperately to pets.

'First a lot of stinking animals! Then a lot of squawking birds! And, now, by Jiminy, if she isn't kissing a turtle!'

Mrs. Jensen, her extremely light housekeeping already postponed, was in truth lying in a long chair on the porch, clad in a play-suit rich in humour and suspense, and she was lavishing caresses on the outworks and bastions of the newly acquired

reptile, which had coyly retreated its head into its shell. It was this ingenuous lady's misfortune, that her many pets, beginning with Mr. Jensen himself, had all found her endearments a little overwhelming, and had turned aside or drawn back their heads, and ended up in the collection of jerry-built cages in the *patio*.

'Like an addict!' said Mr. Jensen. 'Like a dope fiend! Lower all the time! All I can say is, you can't say she isn't asking for it!'

The toucan could not say this. According to the limitations of its kind, it could say nothing at all. No doubt it had its thoughts, but no one ever knows what a toucan is thinking of, except perhaps during April and May. It may be hazarded, however, that this one thought very little of Mr. Jensen. Indeed, had it been as talkative as a parrot, and as wise as an owl, and as hawk-eyed as a hawk, and as burned-up, over the push with the scraper, as a phoenix, it might quite conceivably have expressed itself as follows:

'Can the moral indignation, Jensen! You are trying to work yourself up. You are trying to nerve yourself to a deed altogether beyond your capacity. My advice to you is—*don't*! Throw away that scrap of newspaper with the small ad. upon it! Abandon your dangerous dream! Dan't talk to me of freedom! Freedom, my friend, is strictly for the birds. Take a look at these! They are wings. Where are yours? I thought so, and I need say no more.

'What I will say, however, is that you are in no way equipped to carry out the abominable enterprise you have in mind. Your brain is sluggish, your nerves are shot, your judgment is poor, you are deplorably overweight, and your cholesterol level is perilously high. Consider—still worse!—the darkness, the depth and the wide extent, like night over the Matto Grosso, of your ignorance. Look around you at the limitless panorama of the things you don't know. One or other of these may make all the difference between success and failure. You are ignorant of almost everything I can think of, even during April and May. You disagree on this last point? Let us appeal to Mrs. Jensen.

'Let us get down to concrete examples. You don't know your reptiles. You have just mistaken a common gopher tortoise for a turtle. Your values are all wrong; you implied that the reptile,

qua reptile, is low. It is true that, like you, it has no feathers, but you forget that, like me, it can lay an egg. You may, of course, do something in the latter line if you persist in your foolhardy project, but that will be only in a figurative sense, and it will add nothing at all to your credit or your comfort. And, speaking of comfort, there are several things about the service around here——'

But we need follow no further this purely hypothetical discourse of the toucan, for it was not endowed with the necessary qualifications, and therefore it didn't say a single word. This was a great pity, for it is more than likely that a frank talk more or less along these lines would have had very considerable weight with Mr. Jensen.

Instead, unfortunately, the wind shifted a point or two towards the south-west, and Mr. Jensen was assailed by the hot breath of the Great Cypress Swamp, a district from which emanates a moral as well as a physical halitosis. A smell of ooze, a smell of serpents, a smell of darkness, a smell of decay! Mr. Jensen was not the first man, nor the beach colony the first Eden, to be exposed to this insidious influence.

He was at once afflicted by a vision, as piercing as a toothache, of sleet and skyscrapers. The unreal lineaments of a real saloon rose up about him. He lifted up his eyes to the heights of shadowy apartment houses where the janitor was authorized to insist that no pets of any sort were allowed.

Not even tropical fish?

Not even tropical fish!

Next moment the mirage had faded, and, after the fashion of fading mirages, it left its victim more lost, more desperate and thirstier than before. The Great Cypress Swamp got him on the rebound, which was exactly according to plan. The Great Cypress Swamp did not, through the agency of its pestilential messenger, fill his ear with a long sales-talk about how dignified, how comfortable, how independent, how well supplied with the best of beer and of delicatessen a single Swede might be, who was in a position to add, to the emoluments and perquisites of doorman, elevator operator and janitor, a low fixed income which was entirely his own. The Great Cypress Swamp leaves all that sort of thing to the individual, who never lets it

down. The Great Cypress Swamp has one message, and one message only, for mankind. It says, as softly as a prompter, 'What the hell!'

'What the hell!' said Mr. Jensen, and, straightening up, he left the scraper among the scrapings and padded over to where his wife lay in her chair. She was peering wistfully in at the tortoise, which wore an expression of reserve, and showed no inclination to come out and play.

'The pet shop said they're affectionate,' she complained. 'He seems kind of self-centred to me.'

'I told you don't get a lousy turtle,' rejoined her spouse. 'You fall for any line these fellows hand you. Let me tell you something, Myra. I've been thinking. You know what *you* ought to do, honey? You ought to get yourself a snake.'

'Cold blooded again!' objected Mrs. Jensen. 'I guess when they're cold-blooded they don't ever get real fond of you. Look at him! He's gone right inside.'

'You don't want to judge everything by a turtle,' said Mr. Jensen. 'How can a snake go inside? Where could it go? And if it could, it wouldn't want to. A snake's affectionate. You get the right snake, you got a real pal.'

'People say they hate the sight of a snake,' said Mrs. Jensen, but in a tone not entirely preclusive of sympathy for the underdog.

'That's a lot of prejudice,' said Mr. Jensen. 'Besides, everyone don't think that way. People that know snakes in person don't think that way at all. Remember that act in Tampa you wouldn't go in to see? *Snake Dance Strip-Tease!* That dame had 'em twining all around her. There was a picture of it on the billboard.'

'What do they eat, Hermie?' asked his wife, setting the tortoise on the floor, where it remained as if waiting for a handle and a porter.

'They eat an egg,' said Mr. Jensen. 'All you do is whistle when it's dinner time, and they sit up and beg. Some sorts eat a rabbit, but they're the big ones. What you want is a nice *little* snake.'

'I could carry it around,' said Mrs. Jensen, tentatively.

'Sure you could,' affirmed her husband. 'Down the front of

your dress; that's where they carry them. It could look out at people. Cute as hell!'

'But I don't think I'd like a snake,' said Mrs. Jensen, after a movement which suggested that she was, in imagination, trying one on.

'Okay!' said Mr. Jensen. 'Okay! Okay! Don't have one! No snake! Snake's out! Finished! *I'm* not trying to sell you any bill of goods on a snake, honey—don't get me wrong! You know what I always say: we got too much damned zoo around here already. Only seeing you were so disappointed in that no-good, do-nothing turtle—— Well, forget it! The hell with the snake! Let 'em kill it, and skin it, and make a pair of shoes for a midget.'

'You mean you know of one?' asked Mrs. Jensen.

'Of course I do,' he assured her. 'A fellow was telling me. He's got a pet shop in Miami, and he's stuck with this snake, and he don't know what to do!'

'He's got to get rid of it?'

'Well, you know what the price of eggs has gone up to,' said Mr. Jensen.

'Maybe he'd give it away, to a real good home?'

'A snake-skin's worth money,' said Mr. Jensen. 'This guy's got to eat. All the same, he said he couldn't scarcely face up to killing it. It's so goddam loyal. He said it's got an eye like a dog.'

'Well, I don't know,' said Mrs. Jensen.

'It takes all day to die, a snake does,' continued her husband.

'Do they come very high,' asked Mrs. Jensen after a pause.

'He said twenty,' said her husband, 'but I got an idea I could get it for less. What d'you say, honey? Would you like me to get it for you, for a surprise?'

'Well, not *too much* of a surprise,' said she.

'No,' said he. 'But, *you* know—coming in a box. Gift-wrapped, eh? It can be for our anniversary. Give me a twenty and I'll get going right after we eat. Maybe I'll get it for ten; maybe even for five.'

'I'll come with you,' said Mrs. Jensen, but Mr. Jensen shook his head.

'That's where you went wrong with the turtle,' said he. 'He's got you tied up in his mind with the pet shop where he's been

so miserable. Now look at him—all withdrawn! Like that dame in the movie, and all she needed was love and affection. Listen, if I was a snake I'd like to be put in a box and not know where I was going, and find myself being unwrapped by someone just like you, Myra, in a nice quiet room with the door shut. Then I'd know things were different.'

'I'll have an egg ready for him,' said Mrs. Jensen. 'I suppose he eats it raw?'

'He'll come with directions,' said her husband. 'Let's get the food on the table and I'll be off as soon as we've ate.'

A good husband is always eager to gratify his wife's little fancy, and Mr. Jensen was off almost before the end of their meal; he was still chewing as he drove out to the coastal highway. He did not, however, follow that broad and easy path into Miami, but soon took a narrower road inland, which still dwindled, like a stream nearing its source, as he penetrated deeper and deeper into the wide, vacant and misleading smile of the country north of the Everglades. He was looking for a village called Melodie.

This little number is so elusive, so fugitive, that Mr. Jensen passed it two or three times before he realized it was there. At last he noticed a cluster of mail boxes at the entrance of a stretch of dirt which might conceivably be called a road. The boxes, at their haphazard heights, had something of the appearance of the notes of a bar or two of music, and no doubt those notes, if sketchily whistled over by a talented wayfarer, would have expressed all the sweetness and allure, like that of a pretty girl, of the village they represented. Mr. Jensen was not musically gifted, but even to him the mail boxes expressed quite a good deal.

For example, they indicated that the village he was seeking must lie somewhere down the dirt road, because it could not possibly be anywhere else. If it could, it unquestionably would have been. They also had a rustic simplicity about them, which gave him new hope he might get his snake for five. He left his car on the side of the State highway, and ventured down the track, and was soon rewarded by the sight of some unpretentious roofs. These lay at a little distance, on the other side of a creek. This creek was crossed by what was quite defin-

itely a bridge; in fact on one side of it there was a sort of hand-rail. One part of this hand-rail must have been much firmer than it looked, for a boy was leaning on it. He was a boy of thirteen, but rather small for his age, which was just as well.

On or over the bridge there were also a number of mosquitoes, of the black and day-faring type which are so interesting a feature of the locality. Mr. Jensen did not notice them at first, but they noticed him, and soon began to introduce themselves.

'Is this place called Melodie?' asked Mr. Jensen. 'Where'll I find this snakeologist that hangs out here?'

The small boy looked at Mr. Jensen through a pair of spectacles that seemed rounder and more uncompromising than the ordinary. 'Herpetologist,' he said.

'Listen, bud,' said Mr. Jensen, 'if ever I get the shingles again I won't be coming up *this* neck of the woods for treatment, believe you me! I'm looking for the fellow that runs this ad.' With that, he pulled out his scrap of newspaper, two mosquitoes taking full advantage of the moment that his hand was in his pocket. 'Jesus!' exclaimed Mr. Jensen, slapping his neck and his brow in rapid succession.

'Eidelpfeffer, herpetologist,' said the boy. 'That's me.'

'You?' said Mr. Jensen staring at him in the sort of surprise that is sometimes thought to be unflattering, and was, indeed, thought to be so in this case.

'*Naturalists, pet shops, museums and medical schools supplied,*' quoted the youngster, without deigning to glance at the familiar text. '*Live reptiles for scientific purposes. Rare collectors' items.* Want to buy one?'

'Maybe,' said Mr. Jensen. 'You see, son, I'm a sort of professor from up north. My experiments are going to save a lot of the human race. I've driven all the way down here to get a tip-top, high-powered, poisonous snake. A real stinger.'

'Professor, eh?' said the small boy, who, Mr. Jensen now noted, had an air of being, mentally if not physically, somewhat older than his years. This characteristic was vaguely distasteful to Mr. Jensen, just as was his wife's girlishness; perhaps he was hard to please where mental ages were concerned.

'Well, let's see,' continued the village Ditmars. 'Crotalus? Crotalus adamanteus? Horridus? Or what about Ancistrodon?'

'Nothing important,' said Mr. Jensen. 'I want a decent, straightforward American snake like you'd find in your own backyard.'

'Those are rattlers and copperheads, Professor,' said the boy, eyeing Mr. Jensen with a very offensive, scientific sort of expression. 'I was just giving you the Latin names of them, Professor.'

Fortunately, Mr. Jensen was inspired by a mosquito to slap his brow at that very moment. This not only relieved a certain frustration but it also cued him to the dramatic mimicry of a scientist who has absent-mindedly mislaid his Latin. The interpretation would have done credit to a student of *the Method*. 'Why sure! Sure! Of course!' said he. 'Don't know what the hell I'm thinking of, what with these goddamn mosquitoes buzzing me all the time! But look, kid, I'm not interested in a rattler. I want something with a bit of class to it; little and cute and yet with plenty of zip.'

The boy ruminated for a little. 'Well, Professor,' said he at last, 'I wonder what you'd say to Tyrannosaurus Rex?'

'I came here,' cried Mr. Jensen, 'for a yard of snake, not a yard of highbrow talk. If you've got something like what I said, let's do business. If not, say so, and don't keep me standing here getting bit.'

'I know what you want,' said the boy. 'You want a Coral snake.'

'How's that for size?'

'Twenty inches.'

'Packs a high grade of poison?'

'It certainly does.'

'Good-looking?'

'It's got bands around it; red, black and yellow. It looks like the King snake, and that's the best looking species there is. Here you are!' And the boy fished out a slim handbook from the hip pocket of his jeans and showed Mr. Jensen an attractive colour print of the reptile, banded as described. 'Read what it says,' said he. 'Deadliest type of poison in North or South America. Akin to that of the cobra.'

'That's my baby!' said Mr. Jensen, well pleased.

'What do you want it for?' asked the boy.

Mosquitoes and questions are one of the worse combinations

in the world. 'They've got no right,' said Mr. Jensen, 'to let a kid advertise. Here's the country needing scientists, and my time being wasted driving all the way down here to talk to a runty, four-eyed, question-asking little bastard who don't know a snake from a tape-worm! Keep your snake, punk, and I'll keep my top secret information, and my dough as well.' With that he turned away.

He had not gone very far, however, when, the picture of the snake being very clear in his mind's eye, and its colour and general equipment appealing to him very strongly, and reflecting that he had no idea where he might find such another, he swallowed his resentment and turned back to the bridge.

'Listen, pal,' said he, 'let's make a deal. How do you sell 'em? A little bitsy one like that can't come so very high, I guess? Three bucks? Four? You know, son, they don't give us scientists all the dough in the world to toss around, the way the Reds do. Gee, if I'd had four bucks all to myself when I was your age, I'd have been right on top of the world!' And Mr. Jensen gave this boy, absolutely free of charge, and, it proved, with no strings attached, a big, wide, warm, genial, man-to-man sort of smile. 'Four bucks, eh?' said he.

Alas, the ungrateful child was sharper than the teeth of the serpents in which he dealt. He turned his round, unresponsive spectacles on Mr. Jensen, and these spectacles, in spite of their chilly detachment, seemed to peer into the deepest recesses of that gentleman's heart, or, at the very least, of his pocket-book. And sure enough, when Pint-size at last condescended to acknowledge the offer, he uttered only one word, but that was right on the button. 'Twenty.'

It would be tedious to rehearse each of the dolorous steps by which Mr. Jensen slowly climbed from the low level of his original offer up the almost vertical face of this dreadful boy's cliff-like indifference. That cliff had to be climbed, however, because, as another mountaineer said of another Everest, it was there. Even so, had he not been goaded by the mosquitoes, Mr. Jensen might never have made it. In the end he clinched the bargain at eighteen fifty; this to include a trustworthy box in which to carry the reptile home. The boy retired to a shed in the backyard of one of the shacks on the other side of the bridge,

and soon returned with a neat green carton and a dollar fifty in change.

Mr. Jensen quitted the company of Master Eidelpfeffer and of the mosquitoes without any very profuse thanks or farewells. He felt that both had put the bite on him. He looked back when he reached the turn in the dirt road, and the boy was looking after him with a peculiar expression. Nothing is more upsetting, when one is engaged in an operation of great delicacy, than to be looked at with a peculiar expression.

Mr. Jensen breathed hard as he drove home. There was a small bar at the junction of the inland road with Highway No. 1. Outside it presented the refreshing appearance of half a grapefruit; within, it was as cold, and nearly as dark, as the inside of a deep freeze. It had an atmosphere of the greatest refinement, distinction and exclusiveness; this was achieved by having the juke box turned extremely low. In this retreat Mr. Jensen killed half an hour, four bottles of ice-cold beer and his dollar fifty. It was his purpose to arrive home at exactly six o'clock, that being the hour at which Mrs. Jensen changed from her playsuit into whatever she decided to wear at the evening meal.

Passing through the patio, Mr. Jensen looked upon the toucan, and the toucan looked upon Mr. Jensen. Nothing was said.

Mr. Jensen went into the house, and into the marital chamber where, as he expected, his wife, rosy from the bath, was dimming the highlights a little by the application of a very delicious talcum powder, strongly scented with violets. 'If this snake likes violets,' thought Mr. Jensen, 'we're in business.'

'Here we are, honey!' said he to his wife. 'Here's your surprise.'

'Oh, thank you, Hermie!' said Mrs. Jensen happily. But then, her face falling a little, she said, 'I thought you were going to get it gift-wrapped.'

'The guy where I got this snake,' said Mr. Jensen sombrely, 'was all out of gift-wrapping paper.'

'Never mind,' said Myra. 'We'll put him back next week and wrap him properly for the anniversary.'

'Great!' said Mr. Jensen, and for a moment he could say no more. He felt, at this critical juncture in his affairs, a certain

oppression in his chest, as if his ice-cold beer had frozen into a solid block when only half way down.

'Let's open him right away,' said Myra.

'Now just a minute!' said Mr. Jensen, putting back her hand. 'That's a trained snake, Myra. It's tame. It's affectionate. It does an act. You can tie it round your leg for a garter, or around your neck, or anywhere. You just stick its tail in its mouth like the two ends of a necklace. The guy said you got to love him up; you got to make a pet of him; you got to let him do his stuff, right from the start. He'll be just crazy about you.'

'All right,' said Myra. 'Now let's undo him.'

'Let me get out,' said Mr. Jensen. 'I don't want him seeing me first. He might take to me instead of you. I'll take a little walk, sweetie, and you get real friendly with him.'

He thereupon closed the door very firmly and went for a stroll on the beach. He saw, through the Bates's picture window, the Bates's sitting with their evening Collins. Had Mr. Jensen been a lover of the pictorial arts, he might have engaged in some interesting reflections as to the vastly different schools of the art offered us by a picture window, according to whether we are looking in or looking out. As it was, he thought only of whether he should pay a brief visit to these neighbours, for the purpose of mentioning casually that he had bought his wife a King snake for a present, so that afterwards he might maintain that Master Eidelpfeffer had wrapped him up a Coral snake in error. He was detained from this by noticing that the brother-in-law was there. Brothers-in-law should never be there. This brother-in-law was a game warden from Ocala, and might be too curious or know too much. Mr. Jensen at this point was against intellectual curiosity, knowledge, etc., on general principles, so he reverted to his original plan, which anyway was the better, of representing his deadly purchase as a mere passing snake which had just dropped in, so to speak, for a bite.

As he went back towards the house, Mr. Jensen stopped at the incinerator, and put in a little paper and some dry fragments of palm branches, for at that late moment it struck him that he had better destroy all traces of the green carton, on which the publicity-mad youngster had stencilled his noticeable name. He wondered if by any chance he had overlooked any other

detail of such importance, and the thought caused his nerves to twang like fiddle strings and a perspiration to break out upon his brow. At this moment Mr. Jensen repented deeply and sincerely for his wicked act, and he prayed that some guardian angel might have stayed Myra's hand in the opening of the box, or struck the snake with a toothache, or anything that would get him off the hook. He listened, but all was deathly quiet within the house. He picked up a heavy stick and opened the door and went in.

'Is that you, Hermie?' called his wife. 'Oh, come in here, Hermie! Hermie, I don't think he likes me!'

Mr. Jensen went into the bedroom, all his fears vanished, and feeling only that the snake or his wife, or both of them, had somehow let him down. Some people are never satisfied. 'Afraid to pick him up?' said he morosely.

'I picked him up,' said Myra tearfully, 'I wanted to give him a kiss. But he kept turning his head away. It's cold-blooded, that's what it is! They never get real fond of you when they're cold-blooded.'

'Oh, shucks! You don't know how to handle a snake,' said Mr. Jensen. 'Where is he now, anyway?'

'I put him to bed,' said Myra. 'I'll feed him an egg later, and maybe he'll act different.'

'Maybe,' said Mr. Jensen, glancing at the green box. He suddenly felt that his day had been too much for him, and he lowered himself, with a grunt, on to the connubial couch. 'You and your goddam menagerie!' said he a little crossly.

'I'll put him back in his box,' said Myra.

'You said you had!' cried Mr. Jensen, hastily lifting his feet from the floor.

'Bed, dear,' said Myra. 'Not box. To bed, I said I put him. For his blood to be warmer. Watch out! You'll squash the poor little thing!'

But Mr. Jensen had already done so, in putting back his hand to gain purchase for a quick spring from the bed. 'Oh, my God!' said he. 'It's got me! I'm bit!'

'Better let me put some mecurochrome on it, dear,' exclaimed his careful wife. 'You never know where their teeth have been.'

'They been in me,' said her husband. 'That's where they've

been!' He uttered these words quietly and sadly, with a weariness and detachment which represented only the calm before the storm. 'I'm done for,' he observed.

'It don't look very deep,' said Myra, taking his hand and looking at the two tiny punctures. 'It's not like it was one of those poisonous snakes that bit that poor dog those people had——'

At this point Mr. Jensen recovered his power of speech and a full sense of the urgency of the occasion.

'It is! It's worse! It's deadly!' cried he. 'I'm dying! Get someone, quick!'

'Why, Hermie!' cried Myra with a fond woman's emphasis on the sentimental rather than the practical side of things. 'You didn't ever bring me home one of those poisonous snakes, did you? Hermie, *don't* say you did a thing like that! Not for our anniversary, and all! Oh, Hermie, say you was joking!'

'Joking!' cried Mr. Jensen. 'I'm dying, I tell you! Run!'

Myra ran, but she ran like a hen, in all directions at once. It was several minutes before she returned with Mr. Bates and his brother-in-law, the game warden. Mr. Jensen was to be heard making some very shocking sounds as they approached the house, but, as they entered, he fell silent.

'I'm afraid he's gone, Mrs. Jensen,' said Mr. Bates, speaking from a discreet position in the bedroom doorway. It was not necessary for him to adventure into the bedroom itself, for he had retired only the previous year from the operation of a small but enterprising funeral parlour, and he could have recognized Mr. Jensen's unfortunate condition six blocks away.

'Where's that snake?' said the brother-in-law, advancing into the room, stick in hand.

'Oh, Hermie!' wailed Myra. 'How could you have done it to me? How could you be so bad?'

'Look out!' shouted the game warden suddenly. 'Here it is! Got it!'

It takes very little to put a small snake out of action, and the next moment the two men were bending over this one. 'If this is the snake,' said the game warden to Myra, 'your husband never died of any bite. For a moment I thought it was a Coral, but this here's a King snake, Mrs. Jensen. It's perfectly harmless.'

'Of course, it's for a qualified medical practitioner to have the say so,' said Mr. Bates, 'but you can take it from me, Mrs. Jensen, because I've had nearly forty years' experience, your poor husband passed away from a heart attack.'

'Oh, Hermie,' cried Myra, on a gush of softer tears, 'I knew you was only joking!'

Little Memento

A YOUNG man who was walking fast came out of a deep lane on to a wide hilltop space, where there was a hamlet clustered about a green. The setting encompassed a pond, ducks, the Waggoner Inn, with white paint and swinging sign; in fact, all the fresh, clean, quiet, ordinary appurtenances of an upland Somerset hamlet.

The road went on, and so did the young man, over to the very brink of the upland, where a white gate gave upon a long garden well furnished with fruit trees, and at the end of it a snug little house sheltered by a coppice and enjoying a view over the vast vale below. An old man of astonishingly benevolent appearance was pottering about in the garden. He looked up as the walker, Eric Gaskell, approached his gate.

'Good morning,' said he. 'A fine September morning!'

'Good morning,' said Eric Gaskell.

'I have had my telescope out this morning,' said the old man. 'I don't often get down the hill in these days. The way back is a little too steep for me. Still, I have my view and my telescope. I think I know all that goes on.'

'Well, that's very nice,' said Eric.

'It is,' said the old man. 'You are Mr. Gaskell?'

'Yes,' said Eric. 'I know! We met at the vicarage.'

'We did,' said the old man. 'You often take your walk this way. I see you go by. Today I thought, "Now this is the day for a little chat with young Mr. Gaskell!" Come in!'

'Thanks,' said Eric, 'I will, for a spell.'

'And how,' said the old man, opening his gate, 'do you and Mrs. Gaskell like Somerset?'

'Enormously,' said Eric.

'My housekeeper tells me,' said the old man, 'that you come from the East Coast. Very bracing. Her niece is your little maid. You don't find it too dull here? Too backward? Too old-fashioned?'

'We like that part of it best,' said Eric, sitting with his host on a white seat under one of the apple trees.

'In these days,' said the old man, 'young people like old-fashioned things. That's a change from my day. Now most of us who live about here are old codgers, you know. There's Captain Felton, of course, but the Vicar, the Admiral, Mr. Coperus, and the rest—all old codgers. You don't mind that?'

'I like it,' said Eric.

'We have our hobbies,' said the old man. 'Coperus is by way of being an antiquarian; the Admiral has his roses.'

'And you have your telescope,' said Eric.

'Ah, my telescope!' said the old man. 'Yes, yes, I have my telescope. But my principal pastime—what I really plume myself on—is my museum.'

'You have a museum?' said Eric.

'Yes, a museum,' said the old man. 'I should like you to have a look at it and tell me what you think.'

'I shall be delighted,' said Eric.

'Then come right in,' said the old man, leading him toward the house. 'I seldom have the chance of showing my collection to a newcomer. You must bring Mrs. Gaskell one of these days. Does she find enough entertainment in this quiet part, would you say?'

'She loves it,' said Eric. 'She can't see too much of the country here. She drives out almost every day.'

'All by herself, in that little red roadster of hers,' said the old man. 'Does she like the house?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Eric. 'She did when we chose it last spring. She liked it very much.'

'It's a very nice little house,' said the old man.

'She finds it a little oppressive lately, I'm afraid,' said Eric. 'She says she has got to get out to breathe.'

'It is the difference in the air,' said the old man. 'After living on the East Coast.'

'Probably it's that,' said Eric.

By this time they had reached the front door. The old man ushered Eric in. They entered a very snug, trim little room, the furniture all well polished and everything meticulously

arranged. 'This is my little sitting-room,' the old man said. 'My dining-room, too, these days. The drawing-room and the little study beyond I have given over entirely to my museum. Here we are.'

He threw open a door. Eric stepped in, looked around, and stared in amazement. He had been expecting the usual sort of thing; a neat cabinet or two with Roman coins, flint implements, a snake in alcohol, perhaps a stuffed bird or some eggs. But this room and the study, seen through the connecting doorway, were piled high with the most broken, battered, frowzy, gimcrack collection of junk he had ever seen in his life. What was oddest of all was that no item in this muddle of rubbish had even the excuse of a decent antiquity. It was as if several cartloads of miscellaneous material had been collected from the village dump and spilled over the tables, sideboards, chairs, and floors of these two rooms.

The old man observed Eric's astonishment with the greatest good humour. 'You are thinking,' said he, 'that this collection is not the sort of thing one usually finds in a museum. You are right. But let me tell you, Mr. Gaskell, that every object here has a history. These pieces are pebbles rolled and broken by the stream of time as it flows over the villages in our quiet little district. Taken together, they are a—a record. Here is a souvenir from the war: a telegram to the Bristows in Upper Medlum, saying their boy was killed. It was years before I could get that from poor Mrs. Bristow. I gave her a pound for it.'

'Very interesting,' said Eric.

'That wheelbarrow,' said the old man, pointing out a splintered wreck, 'was the cause of two deaths. It rolled down a bank into the lane here just as a car was coming along. It was in all the papers. *"Local Tragedy."*'

'Extraordinary!' said Eric.

'It all makes up life,' said the old man. 'Here is a belt dropped by one of the Irish haymakers when they fought the gipsies. This hat belonged to the man who had Church Farm, near you. He won a prize in the Irish Sweep and drank himself to death, poor fellow! These are bricks from my gardener's cottage. It burned down, you know, and nobody knows how the fire started. This is a snake which somehow got into the church during

service last year. Captain Felton killed it. He's a very handsome man, don't you think?'

'Yes. I suppose so. I hardly know him.'

'That's funny. I thought you and Mrs. Gaskell were very great friends of Captain Felton.'

'What gave you that idea?'

'Perhaps it was just my fancy. Here is a rather sad exhibit. These horns came from a bull that Farmer Lawson put into my meadow. Somebody left the gate open; it got out and gored a man on the road.'

'We scarcely know Captain Felton,' said Eric. 'We met him when first we came here, but——'

'Quite, quite,' said the old man. 'Here is an anonymous letter. We have them now and then in this district, as in most places. Mr. Coperus gave me this.'

'Are they usually well founded, the hints in your local brand of anonymous letters?' asked Eric.

'I believe they are,' said the old man. 'Someone seems to know what goes on. Here's something that I fear won't last very long: a giant puffball from the graveyard. They grow larger there than anywhere else. Feel how light it is.'

He thrust it toward Eric. Eric had been fumbling with his pipe and tobacco pouch and now put them down to take the puffball. 'Very light,' said he. 'Wonderful.'

'Come through here,' cried the old man eagerly. 'I was forgetting my boots.' Eric followed him, still carrying the giant fungus. 'These boots,' said the old man, 'came off a tramp found drowned in a pond. That little pond near Captain Felton's house.'

'What does Felton do?' asked Eric.

'He has an income,' said the old man. 'He amuses himself.'

'What is his amusement?' said Eric very casually.

'I'm afraid,' said the old man, with a twinkle, 'that Captain Felton is rather one for the ladies.'

'Indeed?' said Eric.

'There are stories,' said the old man. 'The Captain is very discreet, but—you know how it is. That big crystal up there—that was found in the quarry half a mile down our little road here. Well now, that quarry has been out of use for many years. You

can drive into it from the road, and I'm told the Captain finds it a very secluded rendezvous. Dear me, I ought not to gossip. But the fact is the shepherd boys have been known to look over the top, and of course stories get around. People love to chuckle over such matters. I'm afraid that some day one of the worthy gentlemen whose domestic relations the Captain has, so to speak, trespassed upon will look over the top and—well, there are some very large stones lying about. Here is a cat I had stuffed. Now there is a very extraordinary story connected with this cat.'

'Tell me,' said Eric, 'is Felton here now or is he away?'

'He's here,' said the old man. 'I saw his car go by only an hour ago. It's a red car. One doesn't often see a red car, though as a matter of fact another red one came by just after his.'

'I—I think I must be off,' said Eric.

'Must you go?' said the old man. 'I was just going to tell you about this unhappy cat.'

'Another time,' said Eric.

'Another time then,' said the old man. 'I shall always be delighted. Let me see you to the gate.'

Eric hurried through the gate.

'You are not going back the way you came?' said the old man. 'It's quicker.'

'No. No. I have to go round this way,' said Eric.

'That will lead you past the Captain's quarry,' said the old man. 'Well, goodbye. Come again soon.'

He watched Eric stride rapidly down the road and even climbed a bank to watch him farther. When he saw him leave the road and strike over the face of the down, toward the upper lip of the quarry, he went placidly back to his museum.

There he took up Eric's pipe and tobacco pouch and fondled them with infinite affection. It was quite a long time before he could bring himself to place them carefully on a shelf and return to his pottering in the garden.

Are You Too Late or was I Too Early?

In the country I accept the normal and traditional routine, doing what every man does; rising early, eating when I should, turning up my coat collar when it rains. I see the reason for it, and shave at the same hour every morning.

Not so in town. When I live in town I feel no impulse in the starling migrations of the rush hours. There is no tide, in any submarine cave, anywhere, that is not more to me than the inflow and outflow at the cold mouths of offices or the hot mouths of restaurants. I find no growth in time, no need for rain, no sense in sobriety, no joy in drinking, no point in paying, no plan in living. I exist, in this alien labyrinth, like an insect among men, or a man in a city of the ants.

I despise the inconsiderable superiority of the glum day over the starless night. My curtains are always drawn; I sleep when my eyes close, eat when I remember to, and read and smoke without ceasing, allowing my soul to leave my wastrel and untended carcase, and seldom do I question it when it returns.

My chambers are in the stoniest of the Inns of Court. I keep no servant here, for I mean always to go back to the country within the week, though sometimes I stay for months, or . . . I don't know how long. I supply myself with immense stocks of cigarettes, and such food as I happen to remember, so that I shall have no reason to return from the landscapes of Saturn or the undescribed gardens of Tourgeniev in order to go out into the streets.

My fingers are horribly blistered by the cigarettes that burn down between them while still I walk in the company of women with the heads of cats. Nothing seems strange to me when I wake from such reveries unless I part the curtains and look out into the Square. Sometimes I have to press my hands under my heart to resume the breathing that I have entirely forgotten.

I was constantly ambushed and defeated in I forget what journeys, or what loves, or where, by the fullness of a saucer in which a hand of mine failed to find room to crush out its cigarette. Habit, which arranges these things, demanded some other receptacle. I rose, holding my thoughts as one holds a brimming glass, and was moved into the bathroom, drawn by the vague memory of a soap dish, which lay stranded like an empty shell on the empty beaches of a blank mind. But, swallowed by God knows what high-reaching wave, that shell was gone, and my reviving eyes, straying at first aimlessly, soon called me all back again, poor Crusoe! to regard on the cork mat the new, wet, glistening imprint of a naked foot.

It was not long before I had assured myself that I was dry, dressed in my pyjamas and slippers, and that I was not clean. Moreover, this foot, the prints of whose toes were as round as graded pearls, was neither long, like that of a man, nor hideous, like that of a bear; it was not my own. It was that of a woman, a nymph, a new-risen Venus. I conceived that my wandering spirit had brought me back a companion from some diviner sea's edge, and some more fortunate shell.

I drank up this moist footprint with my hot eyes; it dried as I looked upon it. It was not the air took it, but I; I had it for my own. I examined it for days and nights, building, upon its graceful rotundities, arched insteps, ankles equally graceful, and calves proportionately round. I deduced knees, haunches, breasts, shoulders, arms, plump hands and pointed fingers, full neck, small head, and the long curl, like the curve when the wave breaks, of the green-gold hair.

Where there falls one footprint there must fall the next; I had no doubt I should soon be vouchsafed the dull gleam of her hair. For this, I once became ravenous, and slunk restlessly from room to room.

I noticed, with half-unconscious approval, that even the neglected furnishings seemed responsive to the goddess, and stood clean and tidy as onlookers at a holiday. The carpet, as if she were Persephone instead of Venus, bloomed with new flowers beneath her invisible feet. The sun shone through the open window, and warm airs entered. At what moment had I swept back the curtains and extended this invitation to sun and air?

Perhaps she had done so herself. It was, however, impossible to attend to such lovely trifles. I desired the gleam of her hair.

'Forgive me for having rejoiced in the pallor of the dead! Forgive me for having conversed with women who smelled like lions! Show me your hair!'

I was devoured by a cruel nostalgia for this being who was always with me. 'Supposing,' I thought, waking in my strangely fresh bed, 'supposing she appeared terrifyingly in the darkness, white as marble, and as cold!' At that moment I felt an intermittent warmth on my cheek, and knew that she breathed beside me.

There was nothing to clasp but the empty air. For days I moved to and fro, my blood howling in me like a dog that bays the moon. 'There is nothing but the empty air.'

I persuaded myself that this was nonsense. I had seen the trace of beauty, and felt the warmth of life. Gradually one sense after another would be refracted on this divine invisibility, till she stood outlined like a creature of crystal, and then as one of flesh and blood. As soon as I was well-persuaded, I saw her breath dimming upon a mirror.

I saw some flowers, which had appeared, part their petals as she bent her face to them. Hurrying there, I smelled, not the flowers, but her hair.

I threw myself down, and lay like a dog across the threshold, where, once or twice in the day, I might feel the light breeze of her passing. I was aware of the movement of her body, of an eddy in the light where she moved; I was aware of the beating of her heart.

Sometimes, as if out of the corner of my eye, I saw, or thought I saw, not her bright flesh, but the brightness on her flesh, which vanished as I widened my eyes upon it.

I knew where she moved, and how she moved, but I was destroyed by a doubt, for she did not move towards me. Could there be some other existence, to which she was more responsive, some existence less tangible than her own? Or was she my unwilling prisoner here? Were those movements, of which I was not the object, the movements of one who longed only to escape?

It was impossible to tell. I thought I might know everything if only I could hear her voice. Perhaps she could hear mine.

I said to her, day and night, 'Speak to me. Let me hear you. Tell me you have forgiven me. Tell me you are here forever. Tell me you are mine.' Day and night I listened for her answer.

I waited in that unutterable silence, as one who, in a darkness equally profound, might await the arrival of a gleam of light from a star in whose existence he had good reason to believe. In the end, when I had ceased to hope or believe, I became aware of a sound—or something as near to a sound as the light on her cheek was near to the flesh of her cheek.

Now, living only in my ear-drum, not moving, not breathing, I waited. This ghost of a sound increased: it passed through infinite gradations of rarity. It was like the sound in the second before the rain; it was like the fluttering of wings, the confused words of water; it was like words blown away in the wind; like words in a foreign tongue; it grew more distinct, closer.

Sometimes my hearing failed me, exactly as one's sight fails, dimmed suddenly by tears, when one is about to see the face one has always loved, after an ineffable absence. Or she would fall silent, and then I was like one who follows the sound of a brook, and loses it under the muffling trees, or under the ground. But I found it again, and each time it was clearer and stronger. I was able to distinguish words; I heard the word 'love,' I heard the word 'happy.'

I heard, in a full opening of the sense, the delicate intake of her breath, the very sound of the parting of her lips. She was about to speak again.

Each syllable was as clear as a bell. She said, 'Oh, it's perfect. It's so quiet for Harry's work. Guess how we were lucky enough to get it! The previous tenant was found dead in his chair, and they actually say it's haunted.'

Think No Evil

DRIVING home to Swann Cove with the sunset fading behind him, Rugby Warren was annoyed by the billboards which here and there spoiled the beauty of the Dorset coast. Most of them advertised soap or custard powders, but one announced a new tubeless tyre, and another an all-purpose plastic. Rugby had worked along both these lines at one time, but without commercial success. 'All the same,' said he, 'my own things have brought in a nice little income for nearly twenty years.'

Rugby was not, as he would sometimes but not always explain, a scientist. 'Just an inventor,' he would say. 'We count only as ingenious mechanics in these days.' Perhaps Rugby passed rather too lightly over the difference between these days and those days. He had had two quite brilliant ideas when he was still at Cambridge: for an improved cooling system for marine motors and for an improved rust-resistant paint. After the war he had worked on a wide variety of projects, many of which might have been quite interesting twenty years earlier. All the same, he still drew his nice little income. What's more, he was driving a convertible Bentley which was not yet three months old. A new convertible Bentley goes very well with a nice income, but not with a little one.

At about the same hour Julius Cleghorn was approaching Swann Cove, but he was coming from London and by the inland road. Julius was an extremely junior partner in a firm of architects; only just enough of a partner to be able to leave early on Friday afternoons. This permitted him to arrive at the Warrens' house in time for dinner, and all the spring he had been spending his Saturdays and Sundays with these new friends of his, scraping and sandpapering on their sailboat, painting its cabin and galley, and getting it ready for the summer sailing.

Julius could not be called handsome, his features being rather snub. Nevertheless his neck, which was thick, had taken on a warm tan as he worked under the low sun of March and April,

and it was covered, like his arms, which were also thick, with a flaxen fuzz. Although there was really no resemblance, this sometimes reminded people of the down on a peach. There was also something rather flushed and fruity about his cheeks and his mouth. Altogether he was a very edible-looking young man, and he was tempted to shout with pleasure as he drove over the rolling ridges, on the little side road that at last ran down to the cliffs of Swann Cove.

The light was going fast. The sea tilted up into his windscreen. At first it was like a peacock-blue mountain and then like an indigo cloud. Little drops of melting gold appeared trembling on the disappearing headlands, and before he got to the bottom of the hill Julius had to switch on his lights.

The Warrens' drive ran along close to the edge of the low cliff, from which it was separated by an enormous hedge of abor-vitae. A warm up-draught brought the smell of salt and seaweed through the spicy leaves, and Julius felt quite drunk for a moment at the thought of the delicate, double-ended Swedish ketch that lay awaiting him at its mooring just below.

Then the drive took a wide sweep and he was in front of the house. The door opened as he ran up the steps; the maid had seen his headlights on the drive. It is always agreeable not to have to ring and wait. 'Here I am, Emily! Late again, you see!'

The square hall, which had rather stood on the dignity of its Jacobean panelling on the occasion of his first visit, now offered Julius the casual welcome of an intimate friend. It even went so far as to breathe a hint of beef roasting for dinner.

'Dinner's not quite ready yet, sir. Mrs. Warren's still upstairs, I think. Can I take your bag?'

'Don't bother. I know the way. Same room, I suppose?'

Julius marched into the room which had been his on all the previous week-ends. He was happily surprised to find Maria Warren in the act of putting a bowl of cowslips on the table between the windows. Julius dropped his bag on the floor, strode over, and enfolded his hostess in a bear-like hug.

Some young women like bears, or hugs, or both. Others, for one reason or another, do not invite such exuberant though often quite innocent contacts. Had Julius not enjoyed his drive so much, had he not seen the sea dissolving into its living darkness,

and smelt the warm salt air through the spicy leaves, and thought of the lovely shape of the boat, and had he not been greeted by the opening door and the smile of the maid and the smell of the food and the sweetness of the flowers; had he not been thus swept on from one thing to another, he would hardly have ventured to enfold Maria Warren in a bear-like hug.

'Julius, you idiot, you're breaking my back!'

Maria was kind enough to seek an appearance of necessity for stepping away; she found the curtain needed drawing across the window just behind her. Even in doing this she looked back at Julius with a pleasant smile. She wished to make it doubly sure that Rugby's rather hard-up young friend should not feel that he was being in any way snubbed.

'Maria, I wouldn't break your back for all the world, but it's so absolutely wonderful to be down here again. Where's old Ruggles?'

'He went over to Exmouth to get them to weld something he dug out of the engine. He'll be back any minute. Dinner's just about ready. There'll be a drink waiting for you downstairs.'

'Good! Fine! Splendid! I'll be down in exactly two minutes. I only hope Ruggles doesn't hold up that beef I smelled roasting.'

Julius need have had no misgivings; Rugby had already arrived. Coming by the coast road, he had driven in by the back way, into the old farm yard, where a cart shed had been converted into a garage. As he crossed the kitchen garden towards the back of the house, he had looked up at the lighted window of the guest room, and at the very moment when Julius was enfolding Maria in his bear-like hug. To Rugby this bear-like hug offered all the appearance of a passionate embrace.

He saw Maria draw the curtain, and he saw her smile and turn to the young man behind her while she was still in the act of doing so. It has been said there is always someone on the other side of a door; there were quite certainly two people and a bedroom on the other side of that curtain. A smile suggests pleasure, a curtain suggests concealment; the two together imply guilt. The only question that remained in Rugby's mind was the all-important one of what to do about it.

The red-blooded will be ready with all sorts of helpful hints. Stride into the house. Fling open the door. Catch them in what-

ever act they may be snatching time for. Knock the wretch down. Drag him up by the close-gripped lapels of his jacket. Thrash him within an inch of his life. Raise a hand, perhaps, to menace, but on the whole not to strike, the cowering spouse. Finally, eject, expel, spurn out, with a burning glance and a blistering tongue and the toe of a flaming boot, this snake in the long grass and this fallen Eve from the Eden they have so vilely defiled, into whatever may be the prevailing weather.

Rugby's blood was no doubt as red as the next man's; all these projects presented themselves to him with the utmost vivacity. Nevertheless he was bothered by all sorts of little hitches and drawbacks. There were, for example, the ears and the tongues of the servants; there was also the delicate question of style. Thrashing is like a performance on the violin; unless it can be carried out with the utmost ease and mastery it had better not be embarked upon at all. For some reason or other, lovers tend to be younger and lustier than husbands. This point should never be forgotten, and Rugby now remembered Julius's ten year advantage, and the thickness of his neck and arms. He remembered at the same time that physical violence is no longer the mode among civilized people. He noted also that the weather was unusually warm and balmy for early May, and therefore not very suitable for an ejection.

Moreover, they might refuse to be ejected. It was Maria's house, given her lock, stock and barrel by her offensively rich old father. Rugby realized that he himself might be reduced to packing a bag and making a dignified withdrawal, or at all events a withdrawal.

Or a retreat, or a sneaking out, for there could be nothing dignified about it. Guilt is infinitely worse, morally, than the suffering of insult and injury, but it feels, and even looks, more prosperous and agreeable. After all, we choose to be guilty; no one chooses to be insulted and injured. For this reason guilt is not so much sniggered over by servants and neighbours; or at least it is sniggered at with more of envy than contempt. Now Rugby Warren had no taste for being either pitied or despised; he was by nature an extremely proud man.

His pride was all the more alert and sensitive because his income from his early inventions, though nice, was also little.

It amounted only to a few hundred a year, and Maria's father, who was scarcely even a gentleman, had set up a tax-dodging trust for his only child which yielded her as many thousands. Hers was the house; hers the Bentley; hers, legally, the lovely and beloved forty-foot, double-ended Swedish ketch. It was well understood, though never computed, that Rugby's small income paid his share of the household expenses. It could pay for nothing more than a meagre, bed-sitting room sort of life in London. And Rugby, though an extremely proud man, was not quite as proud as all that.

It was a bitter and a miserable thing to be a proud man and yet not as proud as all that. Rugby, however, was not at this moment making such observations. He stood there in the warm and garden darkness, as still and as empty-headed and as comically crucified as the scarecrow which leaned striken and askew among the rows of newly sprouting peas.

Maria herself made these old-fashioned scarecrows with kite faces and turnip heads, and fingers splayed at the ends of broom-stick arms. They mingled thoughts of Paul Klee and memories of childhood. She loved those forms of art in which she could re-experience the fears and the wonders of her infancy. But as he stood like a scarecrow there was no thought of this, either, in Rugby's head at the moment; in fact there was no thought there at all, only a sort of wind-like howling.

At last a voice said flatly: 'At least I know, and they don't know that I know.' This voice must have been one of his own; like Joan of Arc, we all have many. The cool and business-like tone of this one gave Rugby the illusion that things were some-were, somehow, under control; it was like knowing that one's bankruptcy and ruin are in the hands of a first-class lawyer. Rugby found it possible to moisten his lips, to stand more erect and relaxed, even to move his legs and walk into the house.

He found Maria and Julius standing in the hall with drinks in their hands. Their looks of impervious innocence were like a bright, new, all-purpose plastic. They turned smiling faces to greet him, and as they did so he saw his own face in the mirror over the fireplace. The sight of this poor betrayed ghost, pale, sick, dead, drowned like a suicide in the antique dimness of the glass, moved him to such pity that he could neither smile

nor speak. And in such moments it is so imperatively necessary to smile and smile and speak! 'How well they do it!' thought he. 'And I cannot! *No doubt they've had plenty of practice*!'

In the midst of some vociferations from Julius, his own mouth opening dryly and dumbly meanwhile: 'You're rather late,' said Maria. 'Let me look at you! Rugby, is anything the matter?'

'No,' said he. 'Nothing at all. At least, nothing much. Not quite nothing. I ran over a miserable dog.'

'Oh, my god, Ruggles! I know just how you must feel!'

'How dreadful, darling! Did you kill the poor thing?'

'Kill it? Yes. I had to. Afterwards. I put it out of its misery. Will you very kindly pour me a drink?'

This dog, invented all in a split second, became quite attached to its creator; it stayed with him in a number of guises throughout the evening. He could leave it on guard over his drawn looks and long silences, and at the same time it bore him company on his swift-stalking explorations of the new world in which he found himself living or dying. On these excursions it leapt and rolled like a dog let loose from long enchainment, except of course that it was plunging and writhing in agony. At other moments the dog was his love for Maria, suddenly rushing out as if from nowhere, and into the lights and under the wheels. Now it was himself, run down by crude, lewd pleasure; by pleasure so speedy and greedy it couldn't even wait to draw a curtain. And now the dog was the whole situation, the sin and the sinners and the victim, all in one, rolling on the road and screaming high and low.

'Ruggles, of course, is pretending he doesn't hear.'

There are laughs over dinner tables as outrageous as screams, and pretences of concern so hatefully insincere that they are as hideous as screams, and there is knowledge as piercing as a scream, and, by God! there are screams that are screams of pleasure, and in the end there is nothing for it but to find a stick or a wrench and beat and beat the pain and the pleasure and the writhing and the wriggling and the screams of one sort or another all out of their misery and into stillness and silence, and to be a bachelor again. It was at this point that Rugby began to embark on a dangerous fantasy, and he became even more silent than before.

The others went yawning to bed rather early. Rugby sat alone, thinking those old-fashioned thoughts that come creeping in like elderly relatives whenever there's a death in the head. He thought of lust and wickedness and of punishment; he thought of hypocrisy, treachery, ingratitude. 'These people have taken everything I had! They have stolen my life! They have killed me!'

Cries of *Thief* and *Murder* are bound to bring Justice stumbling blindfold to the scene, her scales see-sawing wildly and her sword upraised, ready for instant action. Rugby, however, was not ready for instant action. His fantasy was a deadly one, and he had to decide how to handle it. For the present he wanted to keep it from spreading its wings; he wanted to keep it inside him, in the larval stage. This, unfortunately, is the stage in which things feed and grow. 'We must have proof,' said Rugby, 'plain, cold, legalistic, scientific proof.'

He knew he would get no proof over the week-end, however blind he pretended to be, and however watchful he actually was. He had seen, at the very moment he entered the house, how extremely clever they were.

But on Sunday night, Julius having left after dinner, Rugby again went late to bed, and he had no sooner entered their bedroom than Maria began to talk in her sleep. Usually she slept very quietly, putting on a rather childish and defenceless look, which, it now occurred to him, was perhaps rather overdoing it on the part of a woman of nearly thirty, and one who had so much to defend.

He listened, but no words were distinguishable. He whispered Julius's name to her, using it as a call or a cue to bring her secret sleepwalking eloquently out like Lady Macbeth. But her disciplined iniquity would mutter only in the knavish and evasive double-talk of sleepwalkers, that thieves' argot which, even as it sneaks away under the level of distinctness, yet throbs like a violin with all the various tones of guilt. Rugby could hear the long groan of remorse buried alive, and the plaintiveness of lost innocence wandering like a little girl lost in the tangled woods of sleep, and the soft, tear-dropping, stone-wearing persistence of the captive who weeps endlessly to be free. 'Who, after God knows what freedoms, weeps endlessly to be free!'

'If I get rid of Julius,' thought Rugby, using the term in the ordinary social sense, 'if I stop them now, they will run away together. And if I don't stop them they will get greedier and greedier, and they will run away together. Either way, I shall lose her.' It was at this moment that a person almost unknown to him, a poor and distant relative with the manner of an accountant, attempted to attract his attention with an inventory of other items he would also lose, such as house, yacht, income, Bentley, etc. Rugby, you may be sure, brushed aside this tactless partisan. 'All that will arrange itself,' said he, 'and with exact justice, when justice is done.' When he used the word *justice* he felt a strange sensation, as of being inflated, of being lighter than air, of being about to leave the ground. 'But first,' he said, bringing himself down to earth again, 'the proof!'

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, Rugby took advantage of Maria's marketing and tea-party absences to make a thorough search of her desk, her drawers, her clothes, her closets, her boxes and bags and purses, and even between the pages of her *Alice* and her Hopkins and her Auden and such, which she kept on a shelf of her own. He was not such a fool as to expect any but negative results from this operation, which he undertook only as a concession to scientific method, as a routine clearance of the ground. Nevertheless, even negative evidence is not wholly to be despised. 'What is a footprint,' asked Rugby, 'but a negative, an emptiness, left by one who has, however, been there? There will be an absence of letters in her desk, just as there are no bruises on her skin, or only bruises she might have got aboard the yacht. Adultery is athletic and efficient in these days; sunburned adultery! I mean, there's no more soft *Jersey Lily* flesh like snow for every animal to leave its tracks upon. There is no more *lingerie* in the world; these things are like the way she looks when she's asleep; they could be worn by a schoolgirl, almost by a boy. Yet this stuff is more sexy than all the silks and frills and such nonsense; it is more brisk and ready, and no doubt he found it so. Ah, here's her diary! An interesting place to keep it!'

Rugby took the diary from under the pile of undergarments, a hiding place actually not very interesting since it is commonly made use of in the early teens, and continued out of

habit except by those to whom concealment is a matter of importance. 'We shall not find any cryptic entries here,' thought Rugby.

He soon saw that he was right, except in the sense that gaps, abbreviations, obscure references and indecipherable scribbles made the whole diary cryptic. These gave it something of the poetic quality of an ancient manuscript in whose lost letterings only here and there the names of forgotten gods and loves are legible. Here were the wet roads of winter (*nasty skid near Andover*) and the flowers of spring; birthdays, rainbows, the new car, sowings and plantings, colds and dinner parties, plays and exhibitions; all the happiness of January, February, March and April flaking and fading like a fresco on a crumbling wall. Or, like those fantastic pictures in which a girl's face is made up of flowers and her hair of a mossy bird's nest or of soft moth wings, this intermittent and uncertain record could be regarded as a fragmentary portrait of Maria, or at least a portrait of her girlishness; 'Which is, all the same,' thought Rugby, 'like that childish look she puts on in her sleep, a lure and a lie.'

He tried to read between the broken lines; he was all nerves and intuition. He stared angrily at each page as if demanding an answer to a question still labouring to be formulated. The diary, pursing its illegibilities, stared dumbly back in fear or defiance. All the world knows what a silence of that sort means.

There are mental stresses so intense as to insist on a physical expression; Rugby actually lifted his nose and inhaled deeply. He was in fact snuffing up the salty smell of guilt, which brings out the hound in all of us. 'There is something missing here,' he said. 'Something has been carefully left out.'

Even as he spoke, he realized it was Julius's name. There were names enough, or initials, of all sorts of people of no importance whatever. His own *R* met his eyes wherever he looked, like a forced card being thrust upon him by a conjurer. 'This is rather too blatant,' said Rugby. 'We are not on our honeymoon.' He saw Mary Truslow's name, Mary Tierney's, Edith Whitehouse's, old Doctor Crosby's, all as dull as ditch-water. Even the servants were there, and the gardener. But of Julius, apart from one casual mention on that week-end in February when first they had him down, not a single word!

Not a single word of all the other week-ends, the straw fire affection, the talk, the jokes, the work on the boat, the plans for the summer cruise together!

The sense of smell, though it can stir the darkest deeps in us, is not the most discriminating of our senses. It is difficult to smell a thing steadily and smell it whole. The nose, for example, cannot distinguish that very common form of guiltiness which, like the blush and stammer of self-conscious innocence, is but the shadow of a harmless embarrassment, cast by virtue itself. It is true that Julius's name was missing. So though Rugby failed to notice it, were those of Sir Alex Whitehouse and Gerald Tierney and other attractive young men of their circle. There was a very simple reason for this, but some simple things are beyond our power to imagine. Maria, who had married very young, had early resolved, and with more firmness than perhaps should have been necessary, to be a good, warm, loving, loyal wife. For some reason or other, this quite intelligent and even sophisticated young woman had got it into her head that she was over-sexed, and it was this that caused her to worry and resolve.

It was for this reason she held back from greeting with hugs and kisses, thus most unjustly justifying Rugby's original misapprehension. One night, after a dance, being too tired to sleep, she decided she could not permit herself to feel the existence of certain young men. She was unable to keep them out of her days, and perhaps out of her dreams, but at least she excluded them from her diary, and very often without thinking of it. Whether or not, in view of the sunbleached fuzz on Julius's neck and arms, she would have dared to eat a peach, is a question not to be asked, as peaches were not yet in season.

Jealousy is the only vice which has no sort of pleasure attached to it. It is true that it resurrects in us the power to love. In Rugby, love had snored away years of potential happiness, deep in a dream of self. But, after all, one cannot watch a young woman's smiles and glances, one cannot seek her in the thickets of her sleep, or track her over her living skin and through her desk and her drawers and her thoughts and her days without one's nostrils being filled with her scent. The scent of the body and the mind of a young woman like Maria is intoxicating in

itself. With a little of the smell of guilt mingled in, it can become quite clinically maddening. Rugby's love awoke, but, like a damned soul wakening in hell, it was ugly and it was in pain. The love and the pain were such that he could hardly wait for the next stage of the chase.

This was due on Thursday, the day of the cheap day-return ticket to London, when country wives go up for shopping and to get their hair done. Rugby knew exactly what happened. Like a ghost, he hovered between walls more real to him than his body's dwelling; he saw his wife in Julius's rooms, wearing nothing but that powerfully-built young man's ample bathrobe, with the sleeves turned back over her wrists, eating a sandwich dinner in sinful haste. This picture afflicted him terribly, especially the sleeves. It was in the hope simultaneously of confirming it and abolishing it that he determined to follow her to town.

He wanted proof, but preferably proof of something milder, or at least different; he wanted the ache to be in another tooth. He thirsted for the blessed alternative of an assignation in a hotel room. It would enable him to keep his self-control, to deal with them a little later, to preserve a certain calm efficiency, to regard them, if not with mercy, at least with a surgical detachment. 'People are more guilty until they are proved guilty,' said Rugby. He was becoming addicted to pronouncements of this sort, which seemed to him to have the ultimate authority of those strange sentences we sometimes utter in our dreams. 'For safety's sake alone,' he said, 'they probably meet in some cheap hotel.'

It is not true that jealousy is a vice with no pleasures attached to it. Skills and hazards, and the prospect of a death at the end, are the essential elements of all sports, and these are developed to their highest pitch, not in hunting the fox or the tiger, but in wife-hunting in the wanton streets. Following on foot, yet keeping oneself unseen, sensing with a high-strung instinct which turning she has taken, crossing after the lights have changed, ducking into shop entrances, slipping through the intricate entanglements in the aisles of department stores, avoiding the attention of the sales-people, skirting the dangerous depths of mirrors, short-cutting to the right exit for the break-away, following in a cab without uttering the unutterable

words *Follow that cab!* waiting in a doorway as in a duck blind, waiting with thumping heart for the bird to come homing in to a neighbouring doorway; these are thrills deserving of a lore and an art, of tapestries, prints, a literature, a recondite terminology, of special magazines and the price lists of firms supplying indistinguishable raincoats, protective umbrellas and uncharacteristic hats.

Rugby brought unbelievable skill to this pursuit, and derived from it all its excruciating and almost unrecognizable pleasures. The only trouble was, he drew absolutely blank, and not only on the first Thursday but on the second and the third also. Close as he followed and cleverly as he concealed himself, he could not track his quarry either to Julius's rooms, or to an hotel, or to any place where they could conceivably meet. 'Is it possible that they suspect that I know?'

'If they do, they will stay apart until they can stay apart no longer. Then they will run away together. Or rather, since one can hardly run under a load of securities, a house, garden, yacht, car and all the rest of it, it is I who will be thrown out. They will go abroad for a few months, and I will go to whatever squalid hole I can afford, and it is they who will come back and live here, and they will be congratulated by everyone.'

He went up at night to the guest room to see if the pale face of one standing where he had stood could be seen in the light from the window. A clump of white Shasta daisies, standing a little nearer, was quite invisible. He asked himself if he could have shown something in his manner, or could have been seen when he was following, but he knew perfectly well that he had made no slips whatever. He could see the back of his own head in this matter. His mind was functioning with a better than benzedrine clarity. He felt he was looking down from an immense height, through a hole in the clouds, at two little creatures gambolling over a wide plain. 'The moment will arrive when I shall reach out my hand, and obliterate them——like that!'

To show you how superlatively clear Rugby's mind was, he was fastidiously aware, even as he framed this last sentence, how inevitably such a speech ends with the expression,'——*like that!*' 'One must expect to get a certain amount of vulgar filth on one's hands,' he reflected.

He resolutely dismissed the idea that a soporific could have been put in his after-dinner coffee to enable Maria to pay midnight visits to the guest room. He knew perfectly well that this was out of character, both for Maria and Julius. He knew it was nonsense to ascribe his deep and cavernous sleeps and his unrefreshed awakenings, or even Maria's oddly frequent enquiries as to how he felt, to any such cause. Even more insane—he didn't in the least hesitate to use the word—was the idea of the dosage being increased, until perhaps his heart would fail one night and he would be unable to climb out of one of those grave-like sleeps.

He was quite well aware of the scientific axiom, that when you have eliminated all the impossibilities, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Nevertheless, Rugby dismissed the thought of any sedative being put in his coffee.

He found himself unable to reason any farther; he was up against a blank wall. He was like a patient on the analyst's couch, locked in a pregnant dumbness, behind which forces are building up for a break-through to an unbearable revelation.

He was less clearly aware of certain other forces that were building up within him. His delectable, deadly fantasy, which had been filling him more and more completely all the time, eating out so much of the rest of him to make room for its growth, was now quickening with a sense of the world outside. It is a mistake for those enjoying a little dream of this sort to embark on any action in any way connected with it. Especially to be avoided are actions which continue over a considerable time. It would be better, for example, to risk the brief and boyish buying of a pistol, even with thoughts in one's head of obliterating people——*like that!*—— than to awaken one's most primitive instincts, and to change the very chemistry of one's blood, by indulging hour after hour in the wife-hunt in the wanton streets.

So Rugby at this moment was at once ready for a revelation, and ready to act. When certain explosive fluids, such as fulminate of mercury, reach a critically unstable condition, they begin to travail with forces of their own, and the flash that ignites them is self-generated. 'Not in town, and not in the house here,' said Rugby. 'But there is no other place! Except perhaps the boat.

'But we have always been together on the boat.'

This was a lie, and suddenly he knew it. He ought to have known it before. He was ashamed to have lied without knowing he was lying. He was ashamed both of having deceived himself and of being taken in by himself. He was ashamed to have blotted out those many afternoons when, the wind being cold, or his back aching, or being tired, or being avid for the next chapter of his book, he had said to the others, 'Look here, will you two carry on for a little? There's something I want to fiddle with in the lab.'

You two carry on! A phrase of this sort, swinging like a bell in its ambiguity, can clang and clang in the back of one's head while still one heaves to vomit up the full admission, for which the whole situation, like the impassive analyst, is waiting. 'I ducked out of the work,' said Rugby, halting and almost snivelling like a juvenile delinquent. 'I went up to the lab and read a crime story. Or went to sleep.' The more abject and humiliating a confession is, the more overwhelmingly convincing it must be. It is the equivalent of proof.

You two carry on!

The yacht herself was moored a hundred feet out, because of the tides, and they went to and fro in a dinghy. When he had left them at work in the afternoons, Julius would row him back to the dock, and if he came down later on he would have had to shout for the dinghy to come and fetch him again. And they were remodelling the galley according to certain ideas of Julius's! They were below deck all the time! There was never such security in the world.

You two carry on!

The boat, his beloved boat, was their opportunity and their accomplice. It had taken them in, hidden them from him, bedded them. Rugby experienced a moment of weakness in which he looked back with an ineffable nostalgia to the nursery innocence and the happy, toy-like littleness of his feelings about Maria in Julius's rooms, wearing his bathrobe with the sleeves turned back. This was his last infirmity of that sort. A man whose wife, whose friend and whose boat have all betrayed him must think only of action. 'I shall obliterate them, all three——like that!'

'But I will do it efficiently. I, too, have a right to security. I have a right to . . . '—he had the good taste not to refer to Maria's money—' . . . to my own life. I have a right to marry again, and to have another friend, another boat, even. But this time, perhaps, a yawl.'

They were now in June. The work on the boat was all done, and Saturdays and Sundays were spent sailing her on short day trips in anticipation of August, when Julius would be on holiday and they would set out on their long-planned cruise. Rugby saw clearly that it was necessary to establish a pattern. It should definitely not happen the first time.

'Would you two mind taking her out by yourselves today?'

You two carry on!

'The thing is, I've got an idea. I absolutely must work on it. If I'm right, it's something which could make quite a bit of a bang.'

Maria, you may be sure, put up the most convincing show of reluctance every time. The second time she even followed him to his lab. 'Look, Rugby, you've got all the week to work in. Surely you can come along today?'

'I can't, dear, because I have to put the pressure on when the ideas are coming. And today I feel just in the mood.'

'Rugby, if you won't come, I'd just as soon not go.'

'But what about Julius? What is he down here for, if not for the sailing? I think we have to be fair to him.'

'Oh, Julius won't mind.'

'I think he'd mind very much. Do you think you know him better than I do? I'm quite sure that he'd mind. What's more, he needs the experience. I want him to have all the experience he can get. I'm thinking of August, of course.'

'Well, if you say so.'

Sometimes he was tempted to give way, just to see how they'd wriggle out of it. But such temptations have to be resisted.

'Better go out with the wind as far as you can, and try coming back against it. And if it's getting late, use the engine. After all, it's all experience. Everything you do on a boat is experience of one sort or another, don't you think? I mean, in its way.'

Rugby knew very well they were likely to go out with the

wind without any suggestion on his part. It was the quickest way of reaching that point, ten or fifteen or twenty miles out, where they would feel safe from observation from the shore. He knew also that they would stay there so long, wallowing, that they'd be too late for the long job of tacking home under sail, and they would make up the time by coming in under power. But he realized that, in their labyrinthine deviousness, they might think this was too simple to be safe, and adopt some fantastic and unforseeable manœuvre which could upset his plans. So he felt it as well to smooth the path for them by very casually advising them to do just what they most wanted to do.

On those days that he stayed at home, as on all other days, he worked in that well equipped laboratory that Maria's father had built for him, perhaps as if giving him a hint. It requires no great inventiveness to rig up a primitive device which will convert a fuel tank into first an incendiary bomb, then an explosive bomb, and then an incendiary bomb again. Rugby felt it desirable, though, that the spark-producing mechanism should itself be thoroughly combustible. He knew how often boats will burn down to the water line and then obstinately remain afloat. So he set to work, and he had never worked as hard or as well in all his life. His head seemed to be filled with the remorseless light of moonlight, only a hundred times brighter. Problems that had defeated him in his earlier work on plastics melted away in this uncanny light, and at the end of a month he had a substance entirely of his own creation, and every bit as inflammable as celluloid, the existence of which he had ignored.

A timing device also was needed, and here Rugby had some very stringent requirements. It was essential that the explosion should occur at a time when the boat was far out in the Channel, when no other craft were visible on the horizon, and when all other factors were at their optimum. This would seem to call for both radar and a mechanical brain, but Rugby was not one of those insane scientists who are unaware of the limits of their resources. 'I shall do the timing myself,' said he.

There was nothing in the least suicidal in this decision. On the contrary, it was designed as a final and foolproof insurance

against anything going wrong. Not only was it intended to guard against interference on the sea, but it would triumphantly silence that sort of malicious gossip which, in matters of this sort, has so frequently led to trouble. Julius and Maria had gone out alone on six of the last eight excursions; the most maliciously inspired imbecile would scarcely dare to suggest that Rugby would arrange an accident for one of the very few trips when he himself was aboard.

It was not, of course, his intentions to be there at the actual moment of the explosion. On the night before it was to happen he went down to the boat. Julius and Maria, fatigued by their day on the sea, were already sound asleep. Rugby had very little to do. He made his opening in the fuel tank, and sealed it with a quickly removable plug. He put his sparking device underneath and triggered it with a line which he ran along under the deck and out through a little hole in the bow. Rugby then took all the life jackets but one, and took them ashore with him, and locked them in a little shed on the dock.

'At breakfast,' said he to himself, 'I shall announce that I'm coming along, and they'll try to look tremendously pleased. We shall row out in the dinghy and, as usual, we shall leave her tied up at the mooring. They will not notice the absence of the life jackets. If they do, I shall say that I put them in the shed to have them looked over before we start on the cruise.'

'But they will notice nothing. Twenty or thirty miles out, I shall ask Julius to take the wheel. I shall see that Maria sits beside him; there will be no difficulty about that. I then go below. I take the remaining life jacket in my hand. I pull out the plug in the tank. I go through the galley and up through the forward hatch. I take up my position in the bow with the line in my hand. After watching them for a little while, I will attract their attention.

'I don't think you have noticed, you are so taken up with each other, that there are no life jackets aboard except this one here. The gratings are all nailed down. Do you see this line? When I pull it the boat will blow up and then it will be on fire. Don't move, or I'll pull it at once.'

'Then I shall add a few words about what they have done; and then I shall jump, pulling the cord as I go.' Rugby spent a

considerable time choosing the best possible words for his final excoriation, and it was almost daylight before he got to bed.

He fell into one of those bottomless sleeps he had been having, and he was a little late in getting downstairs in the morning. He saw that Maria had held up breakfast for him, and she and Julius were outside, walking up and down the drive. He had to call to them two or three times before they heard him.

'You shouldn't have waited breakfast,' said he. 'All the same, I'm glad you did. I'm taking the day off, and we can all go out together.'

'Rugby——' said Maria.

'We ought to have told you last night,' said Julius, 'the minute we got in. But we were so absolutely overwhelmed. It took us so completely by surprise.'

'I was afraid of it,' said Maria. 'But I thought it would never happen. I meant it never to happen. Truly I did, Rugby. But yesterday it was so sudden, and so tremendous——'

'It was like a thunderbolt,' said Julius. 'it knocked us right off our feet.' And he put his arm around Maria, who was beginning to cry.

Incident on a Lake

MR. BEASELEY, while shaving on the day after his fiftieth birthday, eyed his reflection, and admitted his remarkable resemblance to a mouse. 'Cheep, cheep!' he said to himself, with a shrug. 'What do I care? At least, I wouldn't except for Maria. I remember I thought her kittenish at the time of our marriage. How she has matured!'

He knotted his thread-like necktie and hurried downstairs, scared out of his life at the thought of being late for breakfast. Immediately afterwards he had to open his drugstore, which then, in its small-town way, would keep him unprofitably busy till ten o'clock at night. At intervals during the day, Maria would drop in to supervise, pointing out his mistakes and weaknesses regardless of the customers.

He found a brief solace every morning when, unfolding the newspaper, he turned first of all to the engaging feature originated by Mr. Ripley. On Fridays he had a greater treat; he then received his copy of his favourite magazine, *Nature Science Marvels*. This reading provided, so to speak, a hole in his otherwise hopeless existence, through which he escaped from the intolerable into the incredible.

On this particular morning the incredible was kind enough to come to Mr. Beaseley. It came in a long envelope and on the handsome note paper of a prominent law firm. 'Believe it or not, my dear,' Mr. Beaseley said to his wife, 'but I have been left four hundred thousand dollars.'

'Where? Let me see!' cried Mrs. Beaseley. 'Don't hog the letter to yourself in that fashion.'

'Go on,' said he. 'Read it. Stick your nose in it. Much good may it do you!'

'Oh! Oh!' said she. 'So you are already uppish!'

'Yes,' said he, picking his teeth. 'I have been left four hundred thousand dollars.'

'We shall be able,' said his wife, 'to have an apartment in New York, or a little house in Miami.'

'You may have half the money and do what you like with it,' said Mr. Beaseley, 'For my part, I intend to travel.'

Mrs. Beaseley heard this remark with the consternation she always felt at the prospect of losing anything that belonged to her, however old and valueless. 'So you would desert me,' she said, 'to go chasing about after some native woman? I thought you were past all that.'

'The only native women I am interested in,' said he, 'are those that Ripley had a picture of—those with lips big enough to have dinner plates set in them. In the *Nature Science Marvels Magazine* they had some with necks like giraffes. I should like to see those, and pygmies, and birds of paradise, and the temples of Yucatan. I offered to give you half the money because I know you like city life and high society. I prefer to travel. If you want to, I suppose you can come along.'

'I will,' said she. 'And don't forget I'm doing it for your sake, to keep you on the right path. And when you get tired of gawping and rubbering around, we'll have an apartment in New York and a little house in Miami.'

So Mrs. Beaseley went resentfully along, prepared to endure hell herself if she could deprive her husband of a little of his heaven. Their journeys took them into profound forests, where, from their bare bedroom, whose walls, floor, and ceiling were austerely fashioned of raw pine, they could see framed in every window a perfect little Cézanne, with the slanting light cubing bluely among the perpendiculars of pine trees or exploding on the new green of a floating spray. In the high Andes, on the other hand, their window was a square of burning azure, with sometimes a small, snow-white cloud like a tight roll of cotton in a lower corner. In the beach huts on tropical islands, they found that the tide, like an original and tasteful *hôtelier*, deposited a little gift at their door every morning: a skeleton fan of violet seaweed, a starfish, or a shell. Mrs. Beaseley, being one of the vulgar, would have preferred a bottle of Grade A and a copy of *The Examiner*. She sighed incessantly for an apartment in New York and a house in Miami, and she sought endlessly to punish the poor man for depriving her of them.

If a bird of paradise settled on a limb above her husband's

head, she was careful to let out a raucous cry and drive the interesting creature away before Mr. Beaseley had time to examine it. She told him the wrong hour for the start of the trip to the temples of Yucatan, and she diverted his attention from an armadillo by pretending she had something in her eye. At the sight of a bevy of the celebrated bosoms of Bali, clustered almost like grapes upon the quay, she just turned around and went straight up the gangplank again, driving her protesting husband before her.

She insisted they should stay a long time in Buenos Aires so that she could get a permanent wave, a facial, some smart clothes, and go to the races. Mr. Beaseley humoured her, for he wanted to be fair, and they took a suite in a comfortable hotel. One afternoon when his wife was at the races, our friend struck up an acquaintance with a little Portuguese doctor in the lounge, and before long they were talking vivaciously of hoatzins, anacondas, and axolotls. 'As to that,' said the little Portuguese, 'I have recently returned from the headwaters of the Amazon, where the swamps and lakes are terrific. In one of those lakes, according to the Indians, there is a creature entirely unknown to science; a creature of tremendous size, something like an alligator, something like a turtle, armour-plated, with a long neck, and teeth like sabres.'

'What an interesting creature that must be!' cried Mr. Beaseley in a rapture.

'Yes, yes,' said the Portuguese. 'It is certainly interesting.'

'If only I could get there!' cried Mr. Beasely. 'If only I could talk to those Indians! If only I could see the creature itself! Are you by any chance at liberty? Could you be persuaded to join a little expedition?'

The Portuguese was willing, and soon everything was arranged. Mrs. Beaseley returned from the races, and had the mortification of hearing that they were to start almost immediately for a trip up the Amazon and a sojourn on the unknown lake in the dysgenic society of Indians. She insulted the Portuguese, who did nothing but bow, for he had an agreeable financial understanding with Mr. Beaseley.

Mrs. Beaseley berated her husband all the way up the river,

harping on the idea that there was no such creature as he sought, and that he was the credulous victim of a confidence man. Inured as he was to her usual flow of complaints, this one made him wince, for it humiliated him before the Portuguese. Her voice, also, was so loud and shrill that in all the thousands of miles they travelled up the celebrated river he saw nothing but the rapidly vanishing hinder parts of tapirs, spider monkeys, and giant ant-eaters, which hurried to secrete themselves in the impenetrable deeps of the jungle.

Finally they arrived at the lake. 'How do we know this is the lake he was speaking of?' Mrs. Beaseley said to her husband. 'It is probably just *any* lake. What are those Indians saying to him? You can't understand a word. You take everything on trust. You'll never see a monster. Only a fool would believe in it.'

Mr. Beaseley said nothing. The Portuguese learned, from his conversation with the Indians, of an abandoned grass hut, which in due time and after considerable effort he located. They moved into it. The days passed by. Mr. Beaseley crouched in the reeds with binoculars and was abominably bitten by mosquitoes. There was nothing to be seen.

Mrs. Beaseley succeeded in taking on a note of satisfaction without in the least abating her tone of injury. 'I will stand this no longer,' she said to her husband. 'I've allowed you to drag me about. I've tried to keep my eye on you. I've travelled hundreds of miles in a canoe with natives. Now I see you wasting our money on a confidence man. We leave for Para in the morning.'

'You may, if you wish,' said he. 'I'll write you a cheque for two hundred thousand dollars. Perhaps you can persuade some native in a passing canoe to take you down the river. But I will not come with you.'

'We will see about that,' said she. She hadn't the faintest intention of leaving her husband alone, for she feared he might enjoy himself. Nevertheless, after he had written out the cheque and given it to her, she continued to threaten to leave him, for if he surrendered, it would be a triumph, and if he didn't, it would be another little black cross against him.

She happened to rise early next morning and went out to make her ungrateful breakfast on some of the delicious fruits that

hung in profusion all round the hut. She had not gone far before she happened to glance at the sandy ground, and there she saw a footprint that was nearly a yard wide; it was splayed, spurred, and clawed, and the mate to it was ten feet away.

Mrs. Beaseley looked at these admirable footprints with neither awe nor interest—only annoyance at the thought of her husband's triumph and the vindication of the Portuguese. She did not cry out in wonder, or call to the sleeping menfolk, but only gave a sort of honking snort. Then, picking up a sizeable palm frond, this unscrupulous woman obliterated the highly interesting footprints, never before seen by a white person's eyes. Having done so, she smiled grimly and looked for the next in line, and she wiped out that one, too. A little farther on she saw another, and then still one more, and so on, till she had removed every trace down to the tepid lip of the lake, where the last was printed at the very edge of the water.

Having obliterated this final footprint, Mrs. Beaseley straightened up and looked back towards the hut. 'You shall hear of this,' she said, addressing her sleeping husband, 'when we are settled down at Miami and you are too old to do anything about it.'

At that moment there was a swirl in the water behind her and she was seized by a set of teeth which quite exactly resembled sabres. She had no leisure to check up on the other points mentioned by the Portuguese doctor, but no doubt they came up to specification. She uttered one brief scream as she disappeared, but her voice was hoarse by reason of the strain she had put on it during the previous weeks, and her cry, even if it had been heard, could easily have been confused with the mating call of the Megatherium, thought to be extinct. In fact, the last surviving Megatherium emerged from the jungle only a couple of minutes later, looked around in all directions, shrugged his shoulders resignedly, and went back the way he had come.

Shortly afterwards, Mr. Beaseley awoke, noted the absence of his wife, and finally went and woke the Portuguese. 'Have you seen my wife?' said he.

'Really!' said the little Portuguese, and went to sleep again.

Mr. Beaseley went out and looked around, and at last returned to his friend. 'I'm afraid my wife has run away,' said he. 'I have found her footprints leading down to the lake, where she has

evidently encountered some native in a canoe and persuaded him to transport her down the river. She was threatening to do so yesterday, in order to take a small house in Miami.'

'That is not a bad town,' said the Portuguese, 'but in the circumstances perhaps Buenos Aires is better. This monster is a great disappointment, my dear friend. Let us go back to Buenos Aires, where I will show you some extraordinary things—in quite a different line of course—such as your Ripley has never dreamed of.'

'What an agreeable companion you are!' said Mr. Beaseley. 'You make even city life sound attractive.'

'Well, if you get tired of it, we can always move on,' said the little Portuguese. 'I know some tropical islands where the girls—though their lips are not designed to hold dinner plates—are nevertheless marvels of nature, and their dances are wonders of art.'

Old Acquaintance

IT WAS an apartment on the fifth floor in the sixteenth *arrondissement*, was pervaded by the respectable smell of furniture polish. The apartments in this neighbourhood smell either thus, or of a certain perfume, which indicates quite a different way of living.

Monsieur and Madame Dupres, admirably fitted by temperament for the rotund connubialities of a more spicily scented dwelling, nevertheless had dwindled away twenty years of life in the austere aroma of furniture polish. This was because of an intense though unacknowledged jealousy, which had early inclined both parties to the mortification of their own flesh.

Monsieur had been jealous because he had suspected that Madame had not been altogether free from certain regrets when they married. Madame had been jealous rather in the manner of a miser who underpays his servant and therefore suspects his honesty. It is true that on the rare occasions when they visited the café, Monsieur would look round for a copy of *La Vie Parisienne*, and if there was a picture in it that interested him, his eyes would remain riveted on it for five minutes at a stretch.

Hence the unvoluptuous furniture of Parisian puritanism, and hence its weekly anointings with the pungent resins of respectability.

Now, in the bedroom, the smell of medicine was added. Madame Dupres lay dying of a frugal pneumonia. Her husband sat beside the bed, unfolding his handkerchief in hopeful expectation of a tear, and craving damnably for a smoke.

'My dear,' said Madame faintly, 'what are you thinking about? I said, "Get the gloves at Pascal's. There the prices are not beyond all reason." '

'My dear,' replied her husband, 'excuse me. I was thinking of long ago; how we used to go about together, you and I and Robert, in the days before he went to Martinique, before you

and I were married. What friends we were! We would have shared our last cigarette.'

'Robert! Robert!' murmured Madame Dupres. 'I wish you could be at my funeral.'

At these words a ray of light fell into a long-neglected corner of Monsieur's mind. 'Holy saints!' cried he, slapping his knee. 'It was Robert, then, all the time!'

Madame Dupres made no reply; only smiled, and expired. Her husband, a little at a loss as to what to do, kissed her lifeless brow once or twice, tried kneeling by the bedside, got up, and brushed his knees. 'Twenty years!' he murmured, stealing a glance at the mirror. 'Now I must let the doctor know, the notary, the undertaker, Aunt Gabrielle, the cousins, the Blanchards. I must call at the Mairie. I can hardly get a smoke at the Mairie.

'I could have a puff here, but people coming in would smell it. It would savour of a lack of respect for the dead. Perhaps if I went down to the street door, just for five minutes. . . . After all, what are five minutes, after twenty years?'

So Monsieur Dupres descended to the street door, where he stood on the step, conscious of the soft air of early evening, and inhaling the smoke from his long-awaited cigarette. As he drew in his first puff, a smile of the utmost satisfaction overspread his plump features.

'Ah, my poor Monsieur Dupres!' said the concierge, emerging suddenly from her den. 'How goes it with Madame? She suffers?'

Conscious of his cigarette and his smile, Monsieur Dupres felt he could hardly explain that his wife had passed away but a minute before. 'Thank you,' said he, 'she suffers no longer. She sleeps.'

The concierge expressed optimism. 'After all,' she said, 'Madame is from Angers. You know the proverb about the women of Angers.'

She prattled on in this vein; Monsieur Dupres paid no attention. 'I will go upstairs,' thought he, 'and make the sad discovery. Then I can return and confront this old cow with a more appropriate countenance.

'And then, my God! there is the doctor, the notary, the funeral arrangements, aunts, cousins . . . My cigarette is done already,

and I scarcely noticed I was smoking it. In a civilized country a bereaved should be left alone with his regrets.'

The concierge retired, but would undoubtedly soon return to the attack. Monsieur Dupres felt that he could do with another cigarette, but this time a cigarette smoked under better conditions, so that its healing task might be accomplished unhindered. His nervous condition demanded a seat in a modern café, a glass of Pernod before him, and all about him the salutary air of cafés, which is infinitely more fragrant than furniture polish.

'A cigarette, a Pernod,' thought Monsieur Dupres, 'and then a good meal! A good meal calls for a glass of cognac afterwards; the digestion requires it, the doctors recommend it. And yet—what is one glass of cognac?

'I will tell you,' said he to a passing dog. 'The first glass of cognac is utilitarian merely. It is like a beautiful woman, who has, however, devoted herself entirely to doing good, to nursing, for example. Nothing is more admirable, but one would like to meet her sister. The second glass, on the other hand, is that self-same sister, equally beautiful, and with leisure for a little harmless diversion. . . . Twenty years!'

Monsieur Dupres went upstairs for his hat.

He decided to go to the Victoire on the Boulevard Montparnasse. It was there they used to celebrate, he and she and Robert, in the old student days, whenever they were in funds. 'It will be, in effect, an act of homage,' thought he, 'far better than disturbing her rest with doctors and cousins. And the cuisine used to be superb.'

Soon he was comfortably seated at the Victoire, with a monster Pernod before him. Every sip was like a caress, and, like a caress, led to another. Monsieur Dupres ordered a second glass, and permitted himself to glance at the pages of *La Vie Parisienne*.

'There is no doubt about it,' said he to himself, 'life is what you choose to make it.' He looked about him in search of a little raw material. 'Those two girls over there,' thought he, 'are probably good-natured to a fault. I wonder if they wear little articles like those in this picture.'

His imagination conjured up a scene which he found incredibly diverting. He was compelled to snigger through his nose.

He experienced an ardent desire to slap somebody. 'What in the world have I been doing,' thought he, 'all these twenty years? Nothing!'

He looked up again, with the intention of darting a certain sort of glance at the two young ladies who had appealed to his fancy. He was mortified to see that they were gone.

He looked around the café, in the hope that they had only changed their table, and saw, to his overwhelming surprise, sitting only a few feet away from him, with a monster Pernod before her, none other than Madame Dupres herself, apparently in the best of health, and wearing her grey hat.

She was at once aware of his regard, compressed her lips, and stifled a giggle, which exploded like soda-water within. She then fixed him with an eye as quizzical as a parrot's eye. Monsieur Dupres, taking up his glass, made haste to join his spouse. 'My dear,' said he, 'I came out to recover my calm.'

Madame made no answer, only downed the second half of her Pernod at a single swig, and, replacing the glass on the table, fixed her eye unwaveringly upon it till her husband signalled the waiter. 'Another Pernod,' said he. 'In fact, bring two.'

The power of conscience is so great, in a small way, that Monsieur Dupres, on being discovered in the café, could not help feeling that his wife knew his most secret intentions, even those concerning the two young ladies. He anticipated a volley of reproaches. You may imagine his relief when he saw that Madame was cocking her eye at him in the most tolerant and understanding fashion over the rim of her glass, the contents of which were drawn up as if by magic into the refined pouting of her lips. 'Marie,' said he after a smile, 'perhaps we have lived too narrowly, as it were. After all, this is the twentieth century. What a magnificent figure of a woman you really are!'

Madame Dupres smiled indulgently. At that moment the door swung violently open, and a man entered, who looked about him on all sides. Monsieur Dupres looked at this man. 'Impossible!' said he. 'As I was saying, Marie, I have a delicious idea. Prepare yourself to be shocked.'

Madame Dupres, however, had noticed the newcomer. She smiled delightedly, and waved her hand. Smiling also, but not evincing any surprise, the newcomer hastened over.

'Robert!' cried Madame Dupres.

'God in heaven!' cried Monsieur. 'It *is* Robert.'

No words can express the felicity of those three old friends, bound together by memories which were only mellowed by the passage of twenty years. Besides, they were already half tight, for it was apparent that Robert also had been indulging in an *apéritif* or two. 'Fancy seeing you!' said he to Monsieur Dupres. 'What a small world it is! There is really no room to do anything.'

Monsieur Dupres was equally incoherent. He could do nothing but slap Robert on the back. They had a last round, and moved into the restaurant on the other side of the partition.

'What have you been doing all these years?' asked Robert as they seated themselves.

'Nothing very much,' said Madame Dupres.

'Oho!' cried Robert, smiling all over his face. 'Is that so? What a magnificent evening we shall have! Tonight we drink the wine we could never afford in the old days. You know the wine I mean, Marie?'

'You mean the Hermitage,' said Monsieur Dupres, who already had his nose in the list. 'Or perhaps the Corton? Why not? To the devil with the expense! A wine like that puts all sorts of ideas into one's head. Champagne first. Why not? Like a wedding. Only better.'

'Bravo!' cried Robert. 'You have neatly expressed it.'

'What shall we eat?' said Monsieur Dupres. 'Study the menu, my children, instead of looking at one another as if you were raised from the dead. We must have something spicy. Marie, if you eat garlic, I must eat garlic. He! He! He!'

'No garlic,' said Robert.

'No garlic,' said Madame Dupres.

'What?' said her husband. 'You know you adore it.'

'One's tastes change,' said Madame.

'You are right,' said her husband. 'That was what I was saying when Robert came in. I wish the fal-lal shops were open. Marie, I would like to buy you a little present. Something I saw in a magazine. Heavens, what wickedness there is in the world! The air seems full of it. Marie, we have wasted our time. Here is the champagne. Here is a toast. After Lent, the Carnival!'

'After Lent, the Carnival!' cried the others, in the highest good humour, touching their glasses together.

'Why be ashamed?' said Monsieur Dupres, laughing heartily. 'We have been married twenty years, Marie. Robert has been in Martinique. There, they are black. What of it?'

'What of it?' echoed Madame, filliping Robert on the nose and giggling uncontrollably.

'Embrace one another!' cried Monsieur Dupres, suddenly, and in a voice of thunder. He rose in his chair to put an arm round each of them. 'Go on! Give her a kiss! She had a weakness for you in the old days. You didn't know that, my boy. But *I* know. I know everything. I remember on the night of our nuptials, I thought: "She has a weakness for somebody." Twenty years! Marie, you have never looked more beautiful than you look tonight. What is twenty times three hundred and sixty-five?' Overcome by the enormous figure that resulted, Monsieur Dupres burst into tears.

While he wept, the others, who were as drunk as he was, leaned across the table, their foreheads now and then colliding, while they chuckled inanely.

With the arrival of the brandy, Monsieur Dupres emerged into a calmer mood. 'The thing to do,' said he, 'is to make up for lost time. Do you not agree with me?'

'Perfectly,' said Robert, kissing him on both cheeks.

'Regard her,' said Monsieur Dupres. 'A woman of forty. Oh, if only those little shops were open! Robert, old friend, a word in your ear.'

Robert inclined that organ, but Monsieur Dupres was unable to utter the promised confidence. He was capable of nothing but a sputter of laughter, which obliged Robert to use his napkin as a towel.

'To the devil with your little shops!' said Robert. 'We need nothing. There are cafés, bars, *bistros*, *boîtes*, night clubs, cabarets, everything. To the boulevard, all three!'

With that, he sprang up. The others unsteadily followed him. On the street everyone looked at them with a smile. Madame's respectable grey hat fell over her nose. She gave it a flick, and sent it equally far over to the back of her head. They linked arms, and began to sing a song about a broken casserole.

They visited several bars, and emerged from each more hilarious than before. The men, crouching down so that their overcoats trailed along the ground, shuffled along in imitation of dwarfs, as they had done in their student days. Madame was so excessively amused that she was compelled to retire into the midnight shadows of the little alley that runs between the Rue Guillaume and the Avenue des Gascons.

'I suppose,' hiccupped Monsieur Dupres, when she rejoined them, 'I suppose we should soon be going home.'

Robert expressed his contempt for this notion wordlessly though not soundlessly. '*Mes amis,*' said he, facing round, and putting a hand on a shoulder of each, while he surveyed them with a comical and a supplicating face, '*mes amis, mes amis, pourquoi pas le bordel?*' At this he was overcome by a fit of silly laughter, which was soon echoed by the others.

'It is, after all, the twentieth century,' chuckled Monsieur Dupres. 'Besides, we must consider our friend Robert.'

'It is in the nature of an occasion,' said Madame. 'It is a little reunion.'

Accordingly they staggered in the direction of an establishment known as the *Trois Jolies Japonaises*, the staff of which would no doubt have worn kimonos were it not for the excessive warmth of the premises. This warmth was the undoing of Monsieur Dupres. They had no sooner seated themselves at a table in the lower salon than he found it necessary to cool his face on the glass table top, and immediately fell sound asleep.

After a humane interval, gentle hands must have guided him to the door, and perhaps given him a gentle push, which set his legs in motion after the manner of clock-work. At all events, he somehow or other got home.

Next morning he woke on the narrow sofa in the dining-room of his apartment, and smelled again the refreshing odour of furniture polish. He found his head and stomach disordered, and his mind half crazy. He had only a vague memory of great dissipation the night before.

'Thank heaven she has been spared this!' thought he, looking guiltily at the closed door of the bedroom. 'It would have upset her appallingly. But what? Am I mad? Do I remember her

somewhere last night? What poison they serve in these days! Yet . . . No, it is impossible!

'I must call the doctor,' he said. 'The undertaker, too. Notary, aunts, cousins, friends, all the damned fry! Oh, my poor head!' As he spoke he was proceeding towards the bedroom, and now he opened the door. His brain reeled when he found his family business would not after all be necessary. The bed was empty. Madame Dupres was gone.

Clasping his brow, Monsieur Dupres staggered from the room, and more fell than walked down the five flights of stairs to the conciergerie. 'Madame!' cried he to that experienced vigilant. 'My wife is gone!'

'I saw her go out last night,' replied the concierge. 'I saw her grey hat go by soon after you had left.'

'But she is dead!' cried Monsieur Dupres.

'Impossible,' replied the concierge. 'I would not discompose you, Monsieur, but Madame was from Angers. You know the proverb.'

With that she retired into her lodge, shrugging her shoulders.

'It was, then,' cried Monsieur Dupres, 'a plot, between her and that abominable Robert! I had better notify the police.'

He took the street car to the Châtelet, and, just as it was jolting along at its fastest, he thought he saw them, still drunk, in broad daylight, staggering round a corner in the Rue de Clichy. By the time he had stopped the car and hurried back, they had utterly disappeared.

Feeling completely overcome, Monsieur Dupres gave up his errand, and decided to go home and rest a little, and took a taxi-cab to get there the sooner. This taxi was halted in a traffic block, and from it Monsieur Dupres saw quite distinctly, in a cab passing across the very nose of his own taxi, his wife and his friend, locked in each other's arms, scandalously drunk, and quite oblivious of his existence. 'Follow that cab!' cried he.

The driver did his best. They followed a cab all the way to the Porte de Neuilly, only to see an elderly gentleman, probably an ambassador, descend from it.

Monsieur Dupres paid the fare, which was no trifle, and made his way back on the Métro. He had just descended from the train, when he saw two people getting in at the very far end,

who were experiencing some difficulty in negotiating the narrow door, for each had an arm around the other's waist. He started towards them but the doors slammed all along the train, and in a moment it had pulled out of the station.

Monsieur Dupres leaned against the wall. 'Is it not my old friend, Dupres?' asked a man who had just come onto the platform. 'I see it is. My dear fellow, are you ill?'

'Ill enough,' replied Monsieur Dupres, utterly shattered. 'My wife has left me, my dear Labiche. She has left me for Robert Crespigny, and they are behaving abominably all over the town.'

'No, no, my dear friend,' replied the other. 'Set your mind at rest, I implore you. We husbands are sometimes even more suspicious than we should be. Crespigny cannot have taken your wife, my dear fellow. I saw him only three months ago, back from Martinique and in hospital. He died a week later. Out there, their excesses are something formidable.'

Mademoiselle Kiki

La Caillot, on the dreary coast west of Marseille, has the smallest harbour in the south of France. Its horseshoe basin shelters a score of fishing boats, and the owners of these boats spend their evenings in the Café Roustand.

Beside the café there is a little angular space with a street lamp and a wind-bitten tree. In front lies the roadway, and beyond it the lapping waters of the harbour. Inside, there are six or eight tables, and the usual small zinc bar near the door. Near one end of this bar stands a rack of postcards, showing views of La Caillot. These are mostly in a rather faded sepia, and have been there for some time. One of them includes the figure of the present proprietor, at a rather earlier age, standing with a hoop in his hand, and a vacant expression on his face. Beyond the rack comes the last foot or so of the counter, and it is here that Kiki sleeps the whole day through. Kiki is a cat in her middle years, but looking rather older owing to the ravages of a passionate temperament.

Had the cat world its Kinsey, he could tell us some remarkable things. For example, there are certain spells in the life of the female of that species when she becomes more than ordinarily interested in the conversation of the opposite sex. These spells are very variable both in their frequency and their duration. Sometimes they occur twice in the year, sometimes thrice, and in the ardent south instances have been known of the manifestation recurring as often as four or five times. Kiki, though no prude, would have disdained such intemperance. In her case the condition prevailed only once in every year. It must be admitted, however, that it lasted, except in leap years, for three hundred and sixty-five days.

Now Kiki, though unusually large and powerful, could not be called a beautiful cat. Her angular frame seemed to have been draped in a ragged, patchy and discoloured fur gleaned from some rubbish heap, and her sides were so knobbly and

uneven as to suggest that this fur was stuffed with old bed-springs from the same source. In the amorous discourse of cats, a vitally important part is played by the vocal preliminaries. In this respect Kiki suffered a disadvantage greater even than that of her appearance. No such dismal, dolorous, and uninviting croak has ever been heard as that which issued from Kiki. It effectively chilled the hot blood of the male cats of La Caillot, a feat otherwise accomplished only by death or the mistral.

Nevertheless, this grim, gaunt, hideous scarecrow of a female lived the life of Reilly, and enjoyed the highest consideration both of the human kind and of her own. In La Caillot, the ordinary run of cats are nothing but anonymous scavengers, but no fisherman left Roustand's at closing time without a very civil *bon soir* to Mademoiselle Kiki. Still more to the point, every evening one or other of them would stop at his boat on his way to the café, and bring up, in a strip of net or an old can, a mess of such sorts of fish as were too boney or flavourless to be marketable. As often as not some rich sardines or delicate merlans, which had been a little trodden upon in the bottom of the boat, were included in the offering.

Such distinction, in a community so utterly neglectful of its cats, needs a little accounting for. The fact is, that when an exceptionally fierce and icy mistral was on its way, and all the local cats kept huddled in whatever shelter they could find, regardless of their hunger and all other earthly appetites, Kiki, foreseeing a lonely midnight, would lift her bristly chin and utter cries of disappointment and fury such as would set the flesh crawling on a man's bones in precisely the same way as did the bitter wind itself. When the record mistral of 1951 was on its way down the valley of the Rhone, and even before it began to flatten the wastes of reeds on the Carmargue, Kiki had raised a banshee wail that was long remembered. It was remembered also that early next morning two of the open boats were blown out to sea and never returned. Much the same thing happened in the big blow in 1953, and Kiki was credited with supernatural powers. When she uttered her most piercing cries the fishermen took warning, stayed at home, listened to the fury of the wind, and agreed that Kiki deserved all the fish she could eat.

They brought her, in fact, rather more than she could eat, but not more than she had a use for. Late in the evening, when the last customer had departed, Roustand would set the chairs on the tables, turn down all the lights but one, and bring from the kitchen a wide platter heaped with the daily tribute of fish. This he would carry outside, and set it down in the little angular space under the tree. Kiki, you may be sure, was close beside him, and had her nose to the platter the moment it clinked upon the ground.

The honest Roustand then re-entered his café, secured the door, extinguished the remaining light, and betook himself to bed.

With the extinction of this last light, there remained only the weak and rather ghastly radiance of the street lamp, and the round, flat and greenishly shining eyes of some half a dozen tom cats, seated on the low wall, or under the bench, or between the cases of empty bottles or in various other points of vantage. There are grades even among the downtrodden cat population of La Caillot, and these represented the lowest grade. These toms were hams.

Not one of the hungry wretches dared to creep over to take a share in the magnificent banquet on which Kiki proceeded to regale herself in full view of them all. Being more powerful than any of them because she was better fed, the Amazon uninterruptedly continued to feed better. Her audience observed with breathless interest the way she took each fish by the snout and crunched it between her side-teeth until she got down to the tail. The more philosophic among them might have noted that riches are not always a guarantee of beauty; the knobbliness of the harridan's sides was not smoothed out by the rich lining of fish. In fact, the existing lumps and bumps seemed to project more hideously than before. There is, however, no evidence that this observation was ever actually made.

By the time Kiki had finished her meal the sizeable platter was somewhere about half empty. At this moment a suppressed exclamation of impatience might have been heard from one or more of the famishing watchers. Kiki paid no heed to this unmannerliness, but embarked on a leisurely toilet, for all the world like some elderly charmer who lingers at her dressing

table in full confidence that her riches will keep her gigolo kicking his heels below.

When at last she considered herself ready, she moved a pace or two away from the platter, and, sadly out of tune, she hummed a few bars of the feline equivalent of *Parlez moi d'amour.* Her calculating admirers, creeping stealthily forward, their bellies low to the ground, soon ringed her about, turning their round and unwinking gaze upon her hideousness, and uttering amorous cries which were so insincere, so contrary to every normal instinct, and brought forth with such desperate, competitive effort, that they sounded like the desolate howls of the lost souls in Hell itself. It was largely because of this hideous racket that the cats of La Caillot were held to be more raucous than those of other places, and were accordingly more execrated and less fed, which in turn laid them under all the greater compulsion to vie with each other in the nightly concert. It will be seen that Kiki's circle of admirers was in every sense a vicious circle.

Kiki alone enjoyed the music, and listened with the air of a connoisseur. In the end, the voice of one or another having attracted her by some resonant suggestion of virility, she advanced her nose to within an inch of that of the chosen swain, and breathed upon him a fragrant reminiscence of her recent meal, rich with the promise of the second course yet to come. She then gratified him with a single harsh croak of approval, on which the rest of the infernal choir at once fell silent, for they realized the game was up.

Everything being well understood by everyone concerned, the business of the evening was then transacted with no concessions to false modesty or sentimental preliminaries. At this juncture a peculiar phenomenon was to be observed, such as makes it all the more regrettable that Dr. Kinsey never turned his attention to the behaviour of cats. Naturally Kiki was entirely preoccupied; so was the drudging mercenary whom she had chosen as her cavalier of the evening. The platter, still well garnished with the remaining fish, thus lay unguarded, yet not one of the rejected suitors, ravenous as they were, stole over to enjoy a free meal. This was in no way due to any nice scruples of honesty, but entirely to the obsessive *voyeurism* of

their species, examples of which may be witnessed by whoever walks after midnight through the back streets and vacant lots of any great city. The round eyes of the rejected were fixed unwinkingly on the spectacle of the unhallowed mating, and the circle, also a vicious one, remained unbroken. Now and then a low moan would issue from under the skeleton ribs of one or another of the watchers, for there are few of us so besotted with our vice or folly as not to be dimly aware of the price we are paying for indulging in it, but these cats were spellbound, fascinated and hypnotized, and they remained rivetted to the spot.

After a certain interval Kiki would sit up, stroke her whiskers, glance around her, and stroll back to the neglected platter. Her lover was permitted to accompany her; he did so with no very noticeable signs of shame or embarrassment. The others, their virtue and their appetites undiminished, wandered disconsolately off on a round of the garbage cans of La Caillot, which are by no means notable for the richness and profusion of their contents.

Thus it was that the unlovely Kiki lived as pleasantly as the sleekest little tabby that ever lapped milk. The only exception was on those nights when the presage of the icy mistral kept the hungriest toms crouching in their lairs, and it was on those nights she set up that dolorous and discontented cry which gave warning to the fishermen, who therefore repaid her out of their catch, and thus enabled this faded Cleopatra to fee her Caesars and her Anthonys. Here is yet another vicious circle; perhaps there are more of them in the world than is generally realized.

This state of affairs had continued for some years when a lady of a very vivid complexion sold a large house she owned in Marseille and bought a small one at La Caillot, which happened to be her birthplace. There she proposed to end her days in retirement and respectable ease. She brought with her her own cat, who was called Papillon. He was a neat, trim, cheerful and well-cared-for animal, as clean as a new pin, nicely marked, and with a coat like satin, and he proudly carried the adornment of a fine red collar, made of patent leather.

No one is absolutely perfect; this Papillon had suffered a certain little deprivation, a mere trifle, nothing to make a fuss

about; on balance it may have added very considerably to his general comfort and well-being, but it was something quite unknown in this very primitive village, where the cat is hardly regarded as a domestic animal, and therefore never domesticated.

Very well, on the first night he was set at liberty, Master Papillon came mincing down to the port, for all the world like a male milliner on holiday; the living principle of plumpness and the incarnation of urbanity and self-esteem. He arrived outside the café at the very moment when Roustand was setting down the big platter of fish, and he estimated that there would be plenty to spare for such a visitor as himself, who had a thousand interesting little stories to recount, of curious things he had happened to witness in Marseille. So he uttered a bird-like chirrup of satisfaction, lifted his tail, and came tripping across to join in the banquet.

Kiki, though momentarily stupefied by his impudence, soon saluted him with a stinging blow in the face, such as he had never dreamed of in all his life before. He began to gibber and back away, but he was wrong even in this. He should have made a full and helter-skelter retreat, for Kiki, feeling he didn't retire with sufficient respectful speed, fell upon him like a thunder-bolt, and drubbed him with two fistfuls of fish-hooks until he fled scampering up to the house of his protectress, leaving half his handsome coat puffing about the quay.

All the same, he had sniffed at the fish, and its fragrance haunted him. It was not long before he ventured out again. The regular circle, had they had the attention to spare, might have noticed his wistful face peeping from behind the tree. He soon understood very well what was going on, having seen something rather similar in Marseille, and the next night he edged up and took his place among the suitors. These regarded him with more of astonishment than hostility. This was less due to his citified air, his general sleekness and his shining collar, than to something at once subtler and more profound, which completely baffled and nonplussed these rugged mercenaries. An intruder of their own kind would quickly have been sent packing, but they felt that Papillon was somehow different. It was something on which they could not put a finger, partly of course because they hadn't a finger among them, and partly

because there was nothing for them to put it on even if they had had one. Papillon, therefore, was suffered to remain.

Kiki, finding him among the others, saw him with a new eye. She was vastly impressed by his collar, which perhaps put certain social ideas into her head, to which even the drabbest of her sex are not altogether immune. She also noticed how extremely well-fed and plump he was, and she was not the first to be misled by appearances. Like his rivals, she was vaguely aware of something different about him, but he came from Marseille, and, 'What the hell!' thought Kiki. 'Who knows?'

Accordingly she approached her nose to that of Papillon, and uttered her hoarse croak of approval. The vain cockney, with a flirtatious smirk, piped a wooing note or two, and proceeded to imitate, to the best of his ability, the conduct that was rewarded by the fish.

The fascinated onlookers shifted their round eyes, exchanged glances and edged nearer, as if in need of spectacles. Kiki was patient for a while, for she believed she was being introduced to sophisticated ways, but after one or two rather broad hints had been disregarded she became completely disillusioned. She faced around, and with one sweep of her paw she sent the hapless eunuch rolling in the gutter. In less time than it takes to tell, she had chosen his successor, and all proceeded as it had done so often before.

Papillon picked himself up, trembling with mortification. He removed certain unsavoury matter from one of his ears, and looked about him, and saw what was going on. His eye fell upon the neglected platter of fish. Now Papillon, if not altogether a tom, was for that very reason not a Peeping Tom. He was under no such obsessive compulsion as the others were, and nothing that he saw seemed to him of the least interest compared with the platter of fish.

He crept towards the feast, at first in hope of snatching a single sardine and bounding away with it, but he quickly realized the tremendous advantage he possessed over the rough-necks he had almost been tempted to envy. He saw them shoot brief and agonised glances in his direction, he heard some low growling sounds and noticed a convulsive start or two, but nothing could break the spell that bound them, and they remained rivetted to

the spot. Papillon, reflecting that it takes all sorts to make a world, devoured the last morsel at his leisure, licked the platter clean, and strolled away up the hill beyond any possibility of pursuit.

Shortly afterwards, the interested circle broke up, and Kiki, followed by her expectant paramour, came over towards the platter. They looked with a blankness absolutely beyond description at the equally blank and empty surface of the dish, upon which not so much as a single scale remained.

What followed was altogether without precedent. The bilked gigolo, using a vile expression, struck Kiki a savage blow on the ear. The unhappy debtor, conscious of the moral weakness of her position, had not the spirit to resent it, but cowered down with her ears close to her head. The enraged tom then withdrew to join his less successful rivals at the garbage cans.

The next evening, instead of six admirers, Kiki had only five. The defrauded hireling of the previous night had decided not to show up, either because of his very natural resentment, or because he thought it better to get first go at the garbage than to risk further labours of love that might be equally unrequited.

His judgement was justified. As soon as all was in train, Master Papillon sauntered easily upon the scene. He met with insouciance the hopeless glare of the imobilized Kiki, and he listened to the moans of the hypnotized circle as a diner-out listens to the agreeable strains which a wandering violinist draws from the agonized cat-gut. At the same time he was busily at work on the platter, and again he devoured the fish to the very last crumb.

The next night, the number of Kiki's suitors was reduced to four, and the night after that to only three, and by the end of the week there was not even one.

Kiki spent the next few days in a condition of shock and depression that was truly pitiable to witness. She sat with her eyes closed and her mouth half open, moving only when now and then she raked her paw from behind her ears to the tip of her nose, as if trying to comb an idea out of her bewildered head. And in the end she succeeded in doing so. She got up, stretched herself, and sallied out in the early afternoon, and went up the little hill in search of Papillon.

Papillon, observing her through the window of his well-warmed house, showed no very strong desire to take a walk in the January air. However, the hour arrived when his mistress urged upon him the necessity of a little constitutional, and he came trembling out into the presence of the cat he had wronged. You may imagine his relief when he found himself greeted with the utmost cordiality, and offered all the advantages of a warm though platonic friendship. His distrust was finally melted by an invitation to a complimentary place at the fish platter; he accepted with alacrity and joined her there that very midnight.

It is true that, when she saw him snugly devouring his portion, his hostess was unable to repress a low rumbling in her throat, but this she may have explained as being due to the presence of a bone there. Alas, it was the very bone she had to pick with poor Papillon!

For some time these two were inseparable, and the whole town wondered at their friendship, and none more than the disappointed mercenaries, who, skulking around, were affronted by the sight of Kiki and her confidant taking their meals together. At other hours the oddly assorted pair were to be seen visiting various corners of the port, or sitting, their noses almost touching, for hours at a stretch, engaged in the endless quiet conversation of their kind. Unquestionably Kiki was hearing the most extraordinary stories about Marseille, and Papillon was being fully instructed in the amenities of La Caillot.

There came a day when two incredibly enlongated clouds stretched themselves across the sky, and a chill came into the sunlight which made the flesh creep and crawl upon the bones. It was obvious that a mistral was on its way; the only question was, how long and how fiercely it might blow. Kiki sniffed the foreboding air and led Papillon out upon the jetty, where they spent another hour or so in the shelter of the sea wall. It was then that Kiki, deprecating her own hospitable platter, spoke fervently of her youthful voyages as a stowaway, and the flavour of the fresh caught sardine eaten while it was still leaping and quivering in the bottom of the boat.

Papillon, whose pleasures were confined to those of the table, was all the more an epicure on that account. He wiped a spot of eager saliva from his lip, and hastened to take a sniff at the

boats that offered such divine opportunities. Kiki gave a three star recommendation to a crazy old hulk called *Les Frères Gobinet*, the least sea-worthy boat in all the port, and the infatuated greenhorn leapt aboard and concealed himself.

Kiki then returned to the Café Roustand, where the fishermen were gathered, debating whether to put to sea or not in face of the oncoming mistral. 'Don't worry,' said one of them as he caught sight of her. 'Look at Mademoiselle Kiki. She is calm; she is tranquil; she is completely at her ease. You may take it from me the blow will die down before midnight.'

'I'm not so sure,' said another. 'It looks like being a regular hurricane.'

'If that was the case,' said a third, 'Kiki would be howling worse than the wind itself. She knows her stuff. She never fails. I've gone by Kiki for seven years now. She is better than a barometer; she is better than the radio, and I for one am not going to miss the catch.'

The discussion continued for some time, but Kiki's placid demeanour ultimately convinced even the most sceptical, and soon after midnight they one and all repaired to their boats.

Before dawn the worst mistral in living memory swept over the Bouches du Rhône. The fishing fleet was blown far out to sea, and when at last it limped back to port it reported the loss of *Les Frères Gobinet* with all hands.

Kiki was justly blamed. 'The dirty old bitch has deceived us,' said the fishermen. 'She knows no more about the weather than that post. She ought to be slung in the port.'

In spite of these hard words they still brought up the nightly mess of fish, because they had always done so. Kiki, as she had always done, ate but half the platterful, and it became known among the underpriviledged of the cat world that a share of the remainder might be enjoyed by the industrious and deserving. The veterans of the informal little club resumed their midnight congregation, and Kiki raised her voice in complaint only when the approach of the bitter wind threatened an interruption of proceedings. This restored her reputation as a weather prophet, thus assuring a continuance of the offerings, and the vicious circle was intact again.

Without Benefit of Galsworthy

THE minute I left the golf links, I gave a sort of sniff. 'Damn it! Poetry about!' I said. I can always tell it; I've got that sort of streak in me. 'Where does it come from?' I said. 'Sunset tints? Going round in eighty? Or what?' Passed a couple of schoolgirls, giggling in a gateway. I could just imagine their conversation: one saying to the other, 'Who's the wicked moustache?' and the other replying, 'Why, that's our handsome Major.'

Life suddenly seemed like a bottle of champagne. Cheltenham looked like a first-class oil painting, only with a lot of decent people living in it. There was *Poona Lodge*. 'Good old *Poona Lodge!*' There was *Amritsar*. 'Cheerio, *Amritsar!*' There was my little box, *The Laurels*. Poetic streak again, you see, calling it that. Better, maybe, if I'd just been an ordinary, damnfool, wooden-headed soldier man. Still, if it wasn't for these sneaking Socialists——

Well, in I went. Adela looked out of the drawing-room. Good old Adela! Sound through and through. Troopships, kids, marvellous head of hair, everything. She gave me a sort of hiss. 'She's come,' she said.

I knew what she meant. We had that sort of understanding. It was the new parlourmaid. 'Grand!' I said. 'Tell her to bring my tea into the Den.'

I went into the Den. Snug little cubbyhole. Mixed myself a peg. 'Hullo! What's this? Poetry's getting stronger!' Had a good look round; caught sight of my moustache in the looking glass. 'Wicked moustache, eh?' That was the word. Gave it a pat. 'Well,' I said, 'damn it!' Very nearly burst out laughing.

In she came with the tea. Ten minutes past five; the moment my life changed completely. Here had I been going about with a streak of poetry all my life; this was the woman it was meant for. Woman, did I say? Little more than a girl. Slip of a girl. Yet, mind you, a touch of the goddess.

I was down. I was out. 'Jack,' I said, 'you're done for.' Talk

about poetry—I tell you I saw that girl, nude, on a beach, in a sort of dawn. The impression was overwhelming. Do you know what I very nearly said? I very nearly said, 'Look here, my dear! Bathing costume, please! Might be trippers about.'

Of course I said nothing of the sort. But I looked it. She seemed to understand. You know what I mean. Goddess—all very well. Moustache—all very well. But if a woman doesn't understand a man, and if a man doesn't understand a woman, there isn't much in it, is there? Still, she seemed to. If it wasn't for these bloody Bolsheviks——

Anyway, there I was, sparring for time, fighting like a madman to get on my feet, face up to it, grip the controls, anything. I said, 'What's your name?' She said, 'Gladys.'

After that neither of us said anything for a while. There we were.

Then she said, 'Please, sir, shall I pour out your tea?'

I said, 'Yes. Always.' Just that, you see? Nothing about the beach. Nothing about anything. Just 'Always.'

And all she said was, 'Very well, sir.'

You see the delicacy? I thought, 'That girl's got breeding.' I'm the true democrat, you see. Or was, rather. I thought, 'There was some young dog of a subaltern hovering round the cottage where you were born, my dear.' But I didn't say so, naturally. Might have been someone in the Diplomatic anyway. '*Very well, sir!*'

That was all. She went out. Went up to her little room, I expect. I was left alone, staring at the fire, like a fellow in a play.

I heard Adela going upstairs. 'Good God,' I thought, 'there's Adela!' I'd forgotten her. 'And the kids!' Clean, decent youngsters. 'God,' I thought, 'there's the Carrington-Joneses, too!' Bitch of a woman. Tongue like a Gurkha's kukri. I thought of the old General, over at Lucknow Grange; dear old boy! Thought of the regiment; young chaps in the mess, keen as mustard, lead 'em to Hell and back. What would they say? Thought of my round in eighty. Thought of a fellow called Uglow. Met him one day in the bar of the Chutna Club. Never saw him again. Don't know why I thought of *him*.

But Adela was in my thoughts all the time, dodging in and out among the others. Then there was a sort of mirage, only not upside down, of this little goddess, on a beach, as it were. Pretty hard to concentrate.

Shall I tell you the words that came into my mind then? 'Play the game!' Woman's heart broken, life ruined, old campaigner like Adela. No! Thought of the day we found a snake in the bed up at Chundrapore. That's another story. Still, it's a link, you know, that sort of thing. Only what's a snake against a goddess? If it wasn't for these blasted agitators——

I did my best. I ignored her all Sunday. Monday morning I came out into the hall. There she was, sweeping the stairs. With a dustpan and broom. You know what I mean. I found Adela in the drawing-room. I said, 'Adela, I've got to go up to town. I've got to see Doggie Weaver.'

She saw something was up. When I'm in a tight place I like to see Doggie Weaver. Been in tight places together. 'You go,' she said. 'Come back on the eight-forty-five.' I said, 'All right, I will.'

So I went up to town. I saw Doggie. I told him everything. I said, 'I've got to choose. And I can't face it.' He said, 'I advise a compromise.' I said, 'What?' He gave a sort of wink. He said, 'Least said, soonest mended.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve for.' I said, 'Doggie, you and I have been in some tight places. Now I think you're a dirty rotten cynic. You don't know what a good woman is, and I wish I'd never been in a single tight place with you.'

So I went out. Then I thought of Piggy Hawkins. Can't say he was ever the most popular man in our mess; still, I had an idea Piggy was all right—a sort of intuition. I looked him up. I told him everything. 'Jack,' he said, 'there's nothing for it. There it is—as clear as daylight. You've got to play the game.'

You see? The very words I'd said to myself. So I knew he was right. I shook hands with him. I said, 'Piggy, we've never been in very many tight places together, but if ever I'm in a tight place again, I hope you'll be there beside me.'

I went back. I had another look at her, just to make sure. I called Adela into the Den. I said, 'Adela, keep a stiff upper lip. You're a soldier's daughter.'

She said, 'Yes, Jack. A soldier's wife, too.'

I said, 'Well, yes. Up to the present.'

She said, 'Don't tell me it's another woman.'

I said, 'I won't. It's a goddess.'

She said, 'I see. Now I'm just the mother of a couple of soldier's children.'

I said, 'Clean, decent kids, Adela. Keen as a couple of well-bred, sporting terriers.'

She said, 'Yes, clean. I must have them, Jack. I'll keep them—clean.'

I said, 'Take them, Adela.'

She said, 'Keep a stiff upper lip, Jack. They've got to have the right sort of school.'

I said, 'Yes, Adela.'

She said, 'And the right sort of home to come home to. The right sort of mother, too. Do you know what they call me?' she said. And she almost broke down as she said it. 'They call me their "lovely mother." I can't be a "lovely mother," Jack, in a ragged old last-season's frock, can I?'

I said, 'All right. I want nothing. I shall be living at Waikiki or somewhere. On a beach.'

She said, 'You must have your baccy, Jack.' The way she said it—I almost broke down myself.

Then, of course, there was her family, and her lawyers, and resigning from everything, and being cut, and the Carrington-Joneses—bitch of a woman—everything. I kept a stiff upper lip, signed everything, never said a word, kept my eyes to myself in the house—didn't want to drag the little goddess into it. Time enough for that when we got to Waikiki or wherever it was.

In the end they took all the furniture out. There I was with my polo cup and a bag of golf clubs in the old Den. Never mind—off to Waikiki or somewhere before you could say knife. Damn these reptiles from Moscow—they're un-English.

I called for Gladys. She came in. I gave her a look. Suddenly the words burst out of me. Did you ever see a light drumfire barrage moving briskly forward in advance of a battalion of the best men God ever made? That's how it sounded to me.

'Here I am,' I said. 'Take me. Play with my moustache. Cut it off if you like. It's yours. So's all the rest of me.'

She said, 'What?'

I said, 'I've given it up. Everything. Adela. Children. The old General—dear old boy, but never mind. Carrington-Joneses. Cheltenham. Club. Regiment. Money. Even a fellow called Uglow—met him in the Chutna Club—never mind him, either. I'm yours. I saw you, nude, on a beach—dawn, everything. Get your hat on, Gladys. We're going into that dawn. We're going to find that beach. Not a tripper for miles!'

She looked at me. Of course I knew she'd be surprised. Hadn't liked to say anything, not while Adela was in the house. Kept it clean, you know. Still, there was that word 'Always.' And 'Very well, sir.'

I thought she was going to say it again. Going to say it, not as she'd said it before, like a mouse talking out of a hole with all the cats of wealth, rank, station, convention, and God knows what prowling about the room, if you know what I mean, but loudly, triumphantly, and with a sort of spring at the end of it.

She was loud enough. Did you ever see a buzz bomb go off? With some poor fellow under it? That's how it seemed to me. I thought, 'Jack, you're knocked out. You're done for.' I looked round. She was gone.

I saw what it was. They'd been at her. The scum! From Moscow. The blasted agitators. The cursed Reds. Nobody's too young for 'em, or too pure. Damn it, they're in the Sunday schools—everywhere. Goddess—what's that to them? Eyes, little ears, everything—they don't give a damn. Class against class, that's their motto. Class hatred! Class war!

Spring Fever

THERE was a young sculptor named Eustace whose work was altogether too life-like for the modern taste. Consequently he was often under the necessity of dropping in upon his friends at about seven in the evening, in the hungry hope of being pressed to stay for dinner. 'I carve the stone,' said he to himself, 'and chisel my meals. When I am rich it will be much the same thing, only the other way round.'

He would eagerly snuff up the odours of sputtering roasts and nourishing stews that crept in from the kitchen, and, excited by the savour, he would exult in his incorruptible ideals and furiously inveigh against the abstractionists. But nature and art were combined against the unfortunate Eustace, for the stimulating vapours worked powerfully upon his salivary glands, and the moderns he most hissingly denounced were Brancusi, Lipchitz, and Brzeska.

It was usually the wives who, thus clumsily reminded of Niagara, demanded that Eustace be got rid of without delay. Numerous devices were employed to this end; one of the most humane was to give him a ticket for some show or other and bid him hurry off and get there before it started.

Thus it came about one evening that Eustace, defeated of a seven-rib roast, found himself unexpectedly watching Charlie McCarthy, whom he regarded with the humourless and critical eye of a hungry sculptor. 'I don't know what all the applause is for,' said he to the man beside him. 'Those jokes are not his own; it's obviously all done by ventriloquism. And considered as a work of art—well, I happen to be a sculptor myself, and I can assure you he's an all-time low.'

'All the same,' returned the stranger, 'he earns I don't know how many hundred thousand bucks a year for his owner.'

'By God!' cried Eustace, standing up and brandishing his fists. 'What sort of civilization is this, anyway? Here's a coarse, crude, comic-looking dummy, not fit even to be called a piece of sculp-

ture, and earns this fellow doesn't know how many hundred thousand a year, while the most life-like work of the century is——' At this point the ushers took him by the seat of his pants and slung him out of the auditorium.

Eustace picked himself up, and shuffled off in the direction of Brooklyn, where the old garage was situated that was at once his abode and his studio. In the near neighbourhood of this place there was a dingy little book shop, with a tray of second-hand books in the entrance. One of these bore the conspicuous title, *Practical Ventriloquism*. Eustace's eye fell upon this title, and he stopped and picked up the book and looked at it with a sneer. 'Art and the Ideal,' said he, 'have brought me to this pass. If that fellow's figures were correct, Ventriloquism and the Practical may get me out of it.' He glanced into the interior of the shop and saw that no one was looking at him. He at once slipped the book under his jacket, and made his way off. 'I am now a thief,' said he to himself. 'How does it feel to be a thief, Eustace?' And he answered, 'It feels fine.'

Arrived home, he studied the book with great concentration. 'This is perfectly simple,' said he. 'You just take your voice and bounce it, as if it were a ball, immobilizing the jaws as you do so. I used to bounce a ball as a youngster, and my jaws have had good practice at resting immobile. Here, too, is a little picture of the larynx, with A, B, C, D—everything. I can learn to ventriloquize as well as anyone, and with a dummy that is a real work of art I shall soon be making a fortune.'

He at once dragged out all his long accumulated works, to find one suitable to set up as a rival to Charlie McCarthy. But though he had renounced his ideals something of the old artist still survived within him. 'They are all marvellous,' he said, 'but I can do better. I will make something so life-like that the audience will swear it's a stooge, and I shall have to invite them to step up on the platform and stick pins in it.'

He looked about for material from which to carve this masterpiece, but he had been so long on the rocks that he had no longer a piece of stone to work upon. 'Never mind,' said he, 'I will model him in clay, which has the advantage of being lighter and less chilly, and will yield a little to the points of the pins. This will provide an agreeable sensation for those who step up to

make the test, for such people are bound to be sadistically inclined.'

Next morning he went out into the yard behind his studio, and toiled with pick and shovel until he had uncovered a bed of red clay, of a quality very noticeably superior to that which is sold in the art stores. From this he fashioned a male figure of singularly attractive appearance, with crimpy hair and a Graeco-Roman profile. He thought the face wore a slightly supercilious expression, and this he strove to modify, but in spite of his skill his efforts were unavailing. 'After all,' he said, 'it is a work of genius, and as such it is entitled to a slightly supercilious expression.'

In order to impart a sufficient flexibility to his creation, he jointed the limbs and neck with pieces of old bedsprings, such as are indigenous to the soil of the back yards of Brooklyn. This experiment was so successful that he broke up two or three battered alarm clocks he found, which his neighbours had thrown at the cats, and fixed up the fingers, the toes, and the eyelids. He scrabbled about in the debris, and found other springs of all shapes and sizes, which he employed to the utmost advantage, not even neglecting those details that were least likely to be seen by the audience. In the end, the figure had good reason to look supercilious.

Next, he heated his old rusty furnace to the point of incandescence, and baked the clay to a light, porous, and permanent texture. He had given it a low glaze, and tinted it in the most agreeable colours. Finally he borrowed a little money and got his best suit out of hock and found to his delight that it fitted the figure to perfection, which had not been the case when he himself had worn it. Our friend admired the effect for an hour or two; then he took up the telephone and called Sadie. 'Sadie,' said he. 'I want you to come around at once. I've a grand surprise for you.'

'I don't think I ought to come around unless we're able to get married,' said she. 'It doesn't do a girl any good to be seen going to a sculptor's studio.'

'Don't worry,' said he. 'The years of waiting are over. We can afford to flout the conventions, for I shall soon be earning I don't know how many hundred thousand a year.'

'In that case,' she said, 'I'll be around immediately.'

Pretty soon she was tapping at the door, and Eustace hastened to let her in. 'I can hardly believe it,' said she. 'Oh, Eustace, it has seemed so long!'

'Never mind,' said he. 'It's all over now. Let me introduce you to the author of our good fortune. This is Mr. Bertie McGregor.'

'Oh, how do you do?' said she with a blush and a smile. 'If what Eustace says is true, you are my favourite author from now on. Yes, I think you're wonderful.'

'Wonderful is the word,' said Eustace. 'However, you need not go on buttering him up, for he is only a dummy, and the praise is due to me.'

'A dummy?' she cried. 'And I have been talking to him all the time! How handsome he is for a dummy! But, Eustace, when I spoke to him first, it seemed to me he smiled and nodded.'

'He is handsome,' said Eustace, 'because I took pains to make him so. As for smiling and nodding, that is not unlikely, for I have fixed him up with springs. He is perfect in every particular.'

'Is that really so?' said she.

'Yes,' said he. 'In every particular. I will explain it all to you when we are married. But tell me frankly—you don't think his expression is a little too supercilious?'

'Oh, no,' said she. 'I think he just looks sort of cute and masculine; sort of . . . I'll explain it to you when we are married. But, Eustace, if he is really a dummy, how can he be the author of our good fortune? That sounds a bit like fiction to me.'

'I assure you,' he replied, smiling, 'it is straightforward biography.' With that he told her of his great plan. 'And here,' said he in conclusion, 'is a bill I'm designing, announcing us to the public. I thought we might use your savings, and start in by hiring a hall. I think the lettering is pretty effective. See where I invite the audience to stick pins in him at the end of the performance, to assure themselves that he is not really alive, in spite of his life-like appearance and rapier wit.'

'Shall we really have you don't know how many hundred thousand a year?' said she. 'You know how long it has taken me to save up that little nest-egg!'

Eustace pointed proudly to his creation. 'Which is the more life-like?' he demanded.

'In some ways he is, and in some ways you are,' responded Sadie.

'Come, come!' said Eustace, 'I meant he or Charlie McCarthy.'

'Oh, he is,' replied Sadie. 'There's no doubt at all about *that*.'

'Then there's no doubt about the money,' said Eustace. 'And as for your own pitiful little hoard, we'll get it all back the very first evening.' With that he took her in his arms, as masterfully as his somewhat debilitated condition allowed. Suddenly Sadie squealed and thrust him from her. 'Eustace,' said she, 'I wish you would not pinch me like that, even if we *are* going to be rich. After all, we are not yet married.'

'Pinch you?' said he. 'I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing.'

'I didn't say don't dream of it,' said she captiously. 'You're in love. You're young. You're an artist. There's nothing wrong in dreaming.'

'I am glad you think so,' said he, 'for you must have dreamed you were pinched.'

'No. *I* wouldn't dream it,' said she. 'Because I'm a healthy, normal girl, and therefore dream differently. But if you are healthy and normal, as I thought you were, *you* might very well dream of it, because you are a man. But are you? Or are you a mouse?'

'I am a man, Sadie,' said he. 'But hitherto I've been an artist also, and that sort of thing has been absorbed in the creative impulse. Now I am altogether practical, and I expect I shall dream like a demon. Don't let us quarrel, my dear. After all, what's a pinch, be it real or imaginary? Perhaps I did it unconsciously—who can tell? Let us go to the bank and draw out your money, and then we will hire the hall.'

This was done, and Bertie and Eustace were billed all over the neighbourhood in large lettering. The fateful night arrived, and Sadie had a seat in the front row, and nearly twisted her head off looking back to count the audience, for the truth is, she was extremely anxious about her nest-egg.

Her fears were quickly laid to rest, for the hall filled up very pleasantly, and soon the curtain was raised, and there was Eustace bowing and smiling like a Svengali. Bertie also graciously responded to the applause. 'What wonderful springs Eustace must have fixed in him!' thought Sadie. 'I should think there

is hardly anything he couldn't do. Certainly he is very much handsomer than Charlie McCarthy.'

Now the show began, and to Sadie's dismay a slight hitch soon became apparent. Eustace took the figure on his knee, and addressed some old and corny gags to it, which he had found in the back pages of the book on ventriloquism. It at once became apparent that he had not studied the front pages sufficiently, for his voice had no more bounce in it than a lump of lead. Moreover, the springs in the figure's jaws obstinately refused to work, and all became aware that Eustace was a lousy ventriloquist.

The audience began to hoot and jeer. Eustace, who had no idea of what was wrong, took this to be a sign that they found the performance altogether too good to be true, so he advanced smiling to the footlights and invited them to come up straightaway and stick pins in the dummy.

There are always some who find an invitation of this sort irresistible. These filed upon the platform, and were handed out-size pins with souvenir heads on them, but as soon as the first of these was applied to Master Bertie, an agonized 'ouch!' re-echoed through the hall and convinced every one that he was not even a genuine dummy.

This completed the disgust of the audience, who felt they had been taken for two rides, in opposite directions. A riot immediately started; the police burst in, and all the money had to be refunded. Eustace, who had come in a cab, had to stagger home on foot, overwhelmed by Bertie's considerable weight and by Sadie's upbraidings, which were no less hard to bear.

Arrived home, he deposited the figure on the divan, and stood like a man utterly beaten, hanging his head. Sadie continued to reproach him, for she felt the loss of her money very keenly, and no longer believed in the I don't know how many hundred thousand a year. 'You did it on purpose,' said she. 'You ruined everything on purpose.'

'No, my dear,' said he. 'I did not do that. My ventriloquism was not very effective, I admit.'

'Don't be so brazen,' said she. 'Don't be so barefaced. That final "ouch" was the work of a master. You paraded your powers just where they were most destructive.'

'No. No,' said he. 'I didn't let out that "ouch." I was as much surprised as anyone.'

'If you didn't do it, who did?' said she.

'How can I tell?' said he. 'Unless, possibly, it was Charlie McCarthy's impresario, who may have attended the show in a false beard, eager to ruin such a promising rival.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said she. 'You did it yourself, and you know it.'

'It may be possible,' said he. 'After all, the pin was stuck into the child of my genius, and I have a sensitive nature, though I am now a practical ventriloquist. But if so, Sadie, I assure you it was unconscious.'

'About as unconscious as that pinch you gave me,' said Sadie with a sneer.

'I swear to you that was an unconscious pinch,' said Eustace.

'Oh, no, it wasn't,' said Bertie, who had been regarding this regrettable scene with his supercilious smile. 'Sadie is right, as usual. It was *I* who gave her the pinch. What's more, I was perfectly conscious of doing so, and the memory lingers yet.'

'But we are not married,' squealed Sadie. 'We are not even engaged. What can we do?' She tittered, placed her hand on her mouth, and regarded the dummy with big, reproachful eyes.

'What are you?' cried Eustace, utterly flabbergasted. 'Speak! Speak!'

'I speak when I want to, and keep quiet when I want to,' replied the image.

'Are you some damned soul,' cried Eustace, 'let out on parole from Hell, who nipped into my furnace to get a brief warm-up, and found my masterpiece there?'

The figure smiled superciliously.

'It is possible,' cried Eustace, 'that the clay in my back yard is the original clay from which Adam was made? But that would imply that Brooklyn is on the site of the Garden of Eden.'

The figure laughed outright.

'Or have I succeeded,' said Eustace, 'where all the scientists have failed, and changed dead clay into organic coloidal matter, charged with pep and energy? That must be it. In that case I'm the hell of a sculptor!'

'Have it your own way,' said the figure. 'In any case you're a

lousy ventriloquist, and it's ventriloquism that rakes in the I don't know how many hundred thousand a year.'

'There is something in that,' said Eustace. 'But since you can speak so well, surely we can give terrific performances.'

'Not with me as the stooge,' said Bertie. 'I have the looks and I have the personality. I'm not sitting on your knee any more. You can sit on mine if you like, and I'll run the show and draw the money!'

'*Me* sit on *your* knee?' cried Eustace. 'No!'

'Oh, it's not so bad,' said the other. 'Come on! Why don't you try it? You don't want to? Well, perhaps the little lady will try.'

'Yes, I will,' said Sadie. 'I don't think I don't know how many hundred thousand a year is to be sneezed at.' With that she seated herself on the image's knee.

'How d'you like it, honey?' asked the image.

'I think we ought to be engaged,' said she. 'In fact, I think we ought to be married.'

'Don't worry about that,' said the image, chucking her under the chin. 'On the stage, it's different. We troupers are practical.'

'Then take your practicality out of my studio,' said Eustace. 'I'm going back to ideals. No more ventriloquism, no more clay, no more springs! I'm going to make tombstones, and by gosh, I'll make 'em heavy!'

'Just as you please,' said the image. 'Sadie and I will get on very well as a couple, and our off-stage life will titillate the repressed teen-agers.'

'She will not like the pins,' said Eustace.

'I shall allow no pins,' said the image with a reassuring glance at Sadie. 'Just a little matter of this sort.' As he spoke, he gave her another pinch, similar to the first he had given her, only this time her squeal was in a deeper, fuller tone.

'Your squeal is very deep and full,' said Eustace to her, as he icily opened the door for their exit. 'You had better remember that some of the springs I used were abominably old and rusty.'

With that he shut the door after them, and, contrary to his expressed intention, he approached a chunk of clay that stood handy, and began to model it into a very fetching Eve-like figure. Halfway through, however, he changed his mind yet again, and turned out a cute miniature poodle.

Back for Christmas

'DOCTOR,' said Major Sinclair, 'we certainly must have you back with us for Christmas.' Tea was being poured, and the Carpenters' living-room was filled with friends who had come to say last-minute farewells to the Doctor and his wife.

'He shall be back,' said Mrs. Carpenter. 'I promise you.'

'It's hardly certain,' said Dr. Carpenter. 'I'd like nothing better, of course.'

'After all,' said Mr. Hewitt, 'you're contracted to lecture only for three months.'

'Anything may happen,' said Dr. Carpenter.

'Whatever happens,' said Mrs. Carpenter, beaming at them, 'he shall be back in England for Christmas. You may all believe me.'

They all believed her. The Doctor himself almost believed her. For ten years she had been promising him for dinner parties, garden parties, committees, heaven knows what, and the promises had always been kept.

The farewells began. There was a fluting of compliments on dear Hermione's marvellous arrangements. She and her husband would drive to Southampton that evening. They would embark the following day. No trains, no bustle, no last-minute worries. Certain the Doctor was marvellously looked after. He would be a great success in America. Especially with Hermione to see to everything. She would have a wonderful time, too. She would see the skyscrapers. Nothing like that in Little Godwearing. But she must be very sure to bring him back. 'Yes, I will bring him back. You may rely upon it.' 'He mustn't be persuaded,' they said. 'No extensions! No wonderful post at some super-American hospital! Our infirmary needs him. And he must be back by Christmas.' 'Yes,' Mrs. Carpenter called to the last departing guest. 'I shall see to it. He shall be back by Christmas.'

The final arrangements for closing the house were very well managed. The maids soon had the tea things washed up; they

came in, said goodbye, and were in time to catch the afternoon bus to Devizes.

Nothing remained but odds and ends, locking doors, seeing that everything was tidy. 'Go upstairs,' said Hermione, 'and change into your brown tweeds. Empty the pockets of that suit before you put it in your bag. I'll see to everything else. All you have to do is not to get in the way.'

The Doctor went upstairs and took off the suit he was wearing, but instead of the brown tweeds, he put on an old, dirty bath-gown, which he took from the back of his wardrobe. Then, after making one or two little arrangements, he leaned over the head of the stairs and called to his wife, 'Hermione! Have you a moment to spare?'

'Of course, dear. I'm just finished.'

'Just come up here for a moment. There's something rather extraordinary up here.'

Hermione immediately came up. 'Good heavens, my dear man!' she said when she saw her husband. 'What are you lounging about in that filthy old thing for? I told you to have it burned long ago.'

'Who in the world,' said the Doctor, 'has dropped a gold chain down the bathtub drain?'

'Nobody has, of course,' said Hermione. 'Nobody wears such a thing.'

'Then what is it doing there?' said the Doctor. 'Take this flashlight. If you lean right over, you can see it shining, deep down.'

'Some Woolworth's bracelet off one of the maids,' said Hermione. 'It can be nothing else.' However, she took the flashlight and leaned over, squinting into the drain. The Doctor, raising a short length of lead pipe, struck two or three times with great force and precision, and tilting the body by the knees, tumbled it into the tub.

He then slipped off the bathrobe and, standing completely naked, unwrapped a towel full of implements and put them into the washbasin. He spread several sheets of newspaper on the floor and turned once more to his victim.

She was dead, of course—horribly doubled up, like a somersaulter, at one end of the tub. He stood looking at her for a very

long time, thinking of absolutely nothing at all. Then he saw how much blood there was and his mind began to move again.

First he pushed and pulled until she lay straight in the bath; then he removed her clothing. In a narrow bathtub this was an extremely clumsy business, but he managed it at last and then turned on the taps. The water rushed into the tub, then dwindled, then died away, and the last of it gurgled down the drain.

'Good God!' he said. 'She turned it off at the main.'

There was only one thing to do: the Doctor hastily wiped his hands on a towel, opened the bathroom door with a clean corner of the towel, threw it back on to the bath stool, and ran downstairs, barefoot, light as a cat. The cellar door was in a corner of the entrance hall, under the stairs. He knew just where the cut-off was. He had reason to; he had been pottering about down there for some time past—trying to scrape out a bin for wine, he had told Hermione. He pushed open the cellar door, went down the steep steps, and just before the closing door plunged the cellar into pitch darkness, he put his hand on the tap and turned it on. Then he felt his way back along the grimy wall till he came to the steps. He was about to ascend them when the bell rang.

The Doctor was scarcely aware of the ringing as a sound. It was like a spike of iron pushed slowly up through his stomach. It went on until it reached his brain. Then something broke. He threw himself down in the coal dust on the floor and said, 'I'm through! I'm through!'

'They've got no *right* to come,' he said. Then he heard himself panting. 'None of this!' he said to himself. 'None of this!'

He began to revive. He got to his feet, and when the bell rang again the sound passed through him almost painlessly. 'Let them go away,' he said. Then he heard the front door open. He said, 'I don't care.' His shoulder came up. like that of a boxer, to shield his face. 'I give up,' he said.

He heard people calling. 'Herbert!' 'Hermoine!' It was the Wallingfords. 'Damn them!' They come butting in. People anxious to get off. All naked! And blood and coal dust! I'm done! I'm through! I can't do it.'

'Herbert!'

'Hermione!'

'Where the dickens can they be?'

'The car's there.'

'Maybe they've popped round to Mrs. Liddell's.'

'We *must* see them.'

'Or to the shops, maybe. Something at the last minute.'

'Not Hermione. I say, listen! Isn't that someone having a bath? Shall I shout? What about whanging on the door?'

'Sh-h-h! Don't. It might not be tactful.'

'No harm in a shout.'

'Look, dear. Let's come in on our way back. Hermione said they wouldn't be leaving before seven. They're dining on the way, in Salisbury.'

'Think so? All right. Only I want a last drink with old Herbert. He'd be hurt.'

'Let's hurry. We can be back by half-past six.'

The Doctor heard them walk out and the front door close quietly behind them. He thought, 'Half-past six. I can do it.'

He crossed the hall, sprang the latch on the front door, went upstairs, and taking his instruments from the washbasin, finished what he had to do. He came down again, clad in his bath-gown, carrying parcel after parcel of towelling or newspaper neatly secured with safety pins. These he packed carefully into the narrow, deep hole he had made in the corner of the cellar, shovelled in the soil, spread coal dust over all, satisfied himself that everything was in order, and went upstairs again. He then thoroughly cleansed the bath, and himself, and the bath again, dressed, and took his wife's clothing and his bath gown to the incinerator.

One or two more little touches and everything was in order. It was only quarter past six. The Wallingfords were always late; he had only to get into the car and drive off. It was a pity he couldn't wait till after dusk, but he could make a detour to avoid passing through the main street, and even if he was seen driving alone, people would only think Hermione had gone on ahead for some reason and they would forget about it.

Still, he was glad when he had finally got away, entirely unobserved, on the open road, driving into the gathering dusk. He had to drive very carefully; he found himself unable to judge

distances, his reactions were abnormally delayed, but that was a detail. When it was quite dark he allowed himself to stop the car on the top of the downs, in order to think.

The stars were superb. He could see the lights of one or two little towns far away on the plain below him. He was exultant. Everything that was to follow was perfectly simple. Marion was waiting in Chicago. She already believed him to be a widower. The lecture people could be put off with a word. He had nothing to do but establish himself in some thriving out-of-the-way town in America and he was safe for ever. There were Hermione's clothes, of course, in the suitcases; they could be disposed of through the porthole. Thank heaven she wrote her letters on the typewriter—a little thing like handwriting might have prevented everything. 'But there you are,' he said. 'She was up-to-date, efficient all along the line. Managed everything! Managed herself to death, damn her!'

'There's no reason to get excited,' he thought. 'I'll write a few letters for her, then fewer and fewer. Write myself—always expecting to get back, never quite able to. Keep the house one year, then another, then another; they'll get used to it. Might even come back alone in a year or two and clear it up properly. Nothing easier. But not for Christmas!' He started up the engine and was off.

In New York he felt free at last, really free. He was safe. He could look back with pleasure—at least after a meal, lighting his cigarette, he could look back with a sort of pleasure—to the minute he had passed in the cellar, listening to the bell, the door, and the voices. He could look forward to Marion.

As he strolled through the lobby of his hotel, the clerk, smiling, held up letters for him. It was the first batch from England. Well, what did that matter? It would be fun dashing off the typewritten sheets in Hermione's downright style, signing them with her squiggle, telling everyone what a success his first lecture had been, how thrilled he was with America but how certainly she'd bring him back for Christmas. Doubts could creep in later.

He glanced over the letters. Most were for Hermione. From the Sinclairs, the Wallingfords, the vicar, and a business letter from Holt & Sons, Builders and Decorators.

He stood in the lounge, people brushing by him. He opened the letters with his thumb, reading here and there, smiling. They all seemed very confident he would be back for Christmas. They relied on Hermione. 'That's where they make their big mistake,' said the Doctor, who had taken to American phrases. The builders' letter he kept to the last. Some bill, probably. It was:

Dear Madam,

We are in receipt of your kind acceptance of estimate as below and also of key.

We beg to repeat you may have every confidence in same being ready in ample time for Christmas present as stated. We are setting men to work this week.

We are, Madam,

Yours faithfully,

PAUL HOLT & SONS

To excavating, building up, suitably lining one sunken wine bin in cellar as indicated, using best materials, making good, etc.

..... £18/0/0

Pictures in the Fire

DREAMING of money, I lay asleep on the Malibu sand. A desolate cry reached me from out of the middle air. It was nothing but a gull, visible only as a burning, floating flake of white in the hot colourless sky, but wings and whiteness and a certain deep pessimism in the croak it uttered made me think it might be my guardian angel.

Next moment, from the dank interior of the beach house, the black telephone raised its beguiling voice, and I obeyed. It was, of course, my agent.

'Charles, I've made a date for you. For dinner tonight. Have you ever heard of a man called Mahound?'

'A Turk?'

'He *could* be a Turk. Have you heard of him?'

'Never.'

'I'll be honest with you, Charles, neither had I. But, believe me, he's solid. Money, new ideas, wonderful organizing power—everything.'

'What does he want from me?'

'Everything.'

'It seems almost superfluous.'

'Look, Charles, this guy wants to make pictures. Pictures have to be written, Charles, and they have to be produced. Now this guy——'

'Does he know my wages?'

'I'm trying to tell you, Charles, it'll be more than salary. A lot more.'

'Where, and at what hour?'

On the first stroke of eight I entered the foyer of the Beverly-Ritz. Precisely on the last stroke, an elevator boy, with an air of triumph, flung back his softly clanging lattice, and disclosed, like a Kohinoor in a casket, a personage of such distinguished bearing that I thought for a moment he must be a dummy, put

there to lend tone to the hotel. I was wrong. He inhaled the smoke of a cigar of surpassing diameter; he swept a dark and flashing glance over the squalid congregation in the foyer; this glance came to rest on my hair, which I arrange in an unaffected style. He knew me; I knew him. 'Mr. Rhthym, this is very, very good of you. You have come all the way up from Malibu.'

'Yes. Why do things by halves?'

'An excellent principle. Mr. Rythym. I have impressed it on my chef, who travels with me. If you'll come up to my little suite here, you shall tell me if I've been successful.'

He fell silent as we entered his suite, awaiting my cry of surprise and admiration. It was with some difficulty that I repressed it. I was enchanted to hear him say, with the faintest discernible chagrin in his voice. 'I hope this sort of decoration is not distasteful to you?'

'Not in the least. I like the baroque; I admire Titian.'

'I confess I like my comfort. I like to travel with my own things. I had some little architectural changes made also.'

'Excellent taste, if I may say so, and excellent judgement!'

He knew that I was impressed, but I knew that he wished to impress me. This made us even, except, of course, he still had the money.

'I shall put that compliment to the test,' said he. 'Will you trust my taste so far as to let me give you a new cocktail; something of my own invention?'

'I look forward to an important experience. How pleasant to talk like this! Which of us started it? I feel that at any moment we may exchange bows.'

The new cocktail was a sizeable affair, with something of the cloudy opalescence of absinthe, and one of those vague but fiery flavours—memories, regrets, contempt for regrets. I swallowed the first; the second swallowed me; I emerged, rather larger and greedier than life, in the midst of a banquet and a conversation. 'Have a little more wine, Mr Rythym. As I was saying, I should like to be like the recognized leader of a revived and superior film industry.'

'All you need is money, and, of course, talent.'

'You are with me then?'

'My agent permitting. A sordid soul, I must warn you!'

'He is to join us later this evening. I think I can talk to him in a language he will understand. Have a little brandy, Mr. Rythym. We'll drink to a long and happy association.'

Next day, I visited Joe's offices at an early hour. Our eyebrows waved like the antennae of encountering ants. 'Well, Joe? Did I sign something last night?'

'Think of a number,' said he.

'Come on! I've been thinking of it all night.'

'Multiply it by five,' said he, smiling.

'Impossible! I'm not Einstein.'

'Here's the contract, Charles. See for yourself.'

'What a lot of pages! Hey! Here's rather a long string of options!'

'Well, like you said last night—"For all eternity, at that figure!" '

'Joe, I'd like to read this contract over with you, word by word.'

'Sorry,' said Joe. 'I've got another client waiting. Did you notice her?'

'I saw, I must admit, what seemed like a patch of sunlight in your ante-room.'

'That was Miss Belinda Windhover from England. Take another look as you go out.'

'Before I do that, Joe, tell me some more about that fellow Mahound.'

'Well,' said my agent, hedging a little. 'What did you think of him yourself?'

'Seems to have been everywhere.'

'He certainly does.'

'Knows everybody.'

'He seems to, indeed.'

'Amazing eyes, Joe.'

'Yes, Charles, quite extraordinary.'

'Anyway,' said I, 'he seems to have pots of money.'

'Rich as the . . . Rich as Croesus,' cried Joe, at once becoming his sunny self again.

'He must be older than he seems, Joe. He described an incident in the Boer War.'

'Did he, indeed? Ha! Ha! I thought you were going to say the Crusades.'

'What's that? He *didn't* describe an incident in the Crusades?'

'He did, though, to me. Of course, people say anything to an agent.'

'Joe, does this Mahound remind you of anybody? Is his name in any way familiar?'

'I never could fit a name to a face, Charles. But I'll swear I've never seen him before.'

'No, but frankly, Joe,' said I uneasily, 'who do you think he is?'

'It's not my business, old chap, to think who people are. That would never do. My job is to sell a client.'

'You've sold me, Joe. Damned if you haven't. Damned anyway! Hell!'

'Look here, old boy. You don't want to get temperamental. After all, it's pictures. Think of the people I've sold you to in the past.'

'Yes, Joe. But these damned options. You didn't really give him options on me for all eternity?'

'Well, it's just a phrase.'

'A phrase! Oh, boy!'

'After all, he's a wonderful organizer. I bet he'll get some amazing effects, too. You work well with him. Rythym, and you've got a blazing future.'

'Joe, this contract's got to be bust. I'm out.'

'Sorry, old chap, it's cast-iron. Besides, think of the money. Think of me. An agent needs his percentage, Charles. Anyway, he may not be what you suppose. You're a writer, a dreamer; you've got to remember this is the twentieth century. Maybe he's just some old guy who found out monkey-glands in the Crusades or somewhere.'

'With those ears?'

'Maybe he was a money-lender in those days. Maybe he got 'em clipped a bit.'

'Those nails?'

'Look, Rythym, you don't want to start being satirical. I know what producers are. I'm a man of taste, same as yourself.

All the same, this is the industry, you know. I do a lot of business with these fellows. I can't go picking 'em to pieces just for a laugh.'

'Joe, I think I'm going to walk about the streets a bit.'

'That's the stuff. I knew you'd shape up to it. God! I'd give the world to undo it, Charles. I just made a fool mistake.'

I went out, passing Miss Belinda Windhover on the way. She looked like an angel. What was that to me? That evening I called again at the Beverly-Ritz, and this time I was shown up to Mr. Mahound's suite. His dressing jacket was stupendous.

'Mr. Mahound, were you by any chance at the Crusades?'

'Mr. Rythym, that was a very interesting assignment.'

'It makes you rather old, doesn't it?'

'Well, one's as old as one feels. I feel devilish young today, my dear Rythym. To be in the Beverly-Ritz Hotel, signing up talent, about to re-create the American Film Industry!'

'Avaunt!'

'My dear fellow! This is the twentieth century.'

'Well then, clear off!'

'Have a cigar.'

'Listen. I'm a tough customer.'

'So am I. Which reminds me: I thought we might do a new version of Jekyll and Hyde. I could play the lead. Watch!'

'Phew!'

'Queer! Everyone hates seeing me like that. There was a saint I once looked in on. She said she'd rather spend the rest of her life on red-hot needles than see me like that for one second. Flattering, in a way. But don't you worry, Rythym, you and I are going to get along like blazes.'

'Yes! Yes, indeed! Stay as you are now, that's all. I see that I'm in for it. I'll do anything you like.'

'That's what I like about writers. Well, now, what are we going to do about making films?'

'Take a friendly word of advice. You don't want to make pictures. It's nothing but worry. Besides, you'll get mixed up with a lot of actors.'

'I have always found the players very congenial.'

'I guess you've been rather out of things recently. You haven't seen some of our stars.'

'My dear Rythym, forgive me, but I'm supposed to have rather a good way with people. As for the worry—pooh! I've been a top executive in one of the biggest organizations in existence. Nothing but grumbling and complaints! Now I've retired, and I mean to enjoy myself.'

'Well, why not sit back?' said I. 'Sit back and take it easy?'

'You should see my throne! No, my dear fellow, I'm crazy to start in making pictures. You concentrate on finding a story. I'll stay here to interview the press. And, by the way, there's someone coming here to see me soon. Your excellent agent found her for me. A clean English girl. Fresh! Unspoiled!'

'I know that sort.'

'I think not, Rythym. She's a mere child! I'm going to groom her for stardom. In fact, she may be here already!' He rang a bell. 'Has a Miss Windhover arrived?'

'Yes, sir. She's waiting.'

'Show her in.'

In a moment Miss Windhover had entered, again like a patch of sunshine, outdoing the costly electric glare.

'Oh, Mr. Mahuond. I——I——I——'

He patted her hand reassuringly. 'Now, now, my dear! Not nervous, surely? Always remember that you have talent, the thing that money can't buy. Remember that. It will give you poise. Miss Marlene Dietrich has poise. I want you to have poise, too.'

'If you knew what it's been like, Mr. Mahound. The struggle for small parts. The cheap boarding-houses. And Daddy's been so cross. And Mummy cries. Why are one's people always such snobs? They're dears of course, old-fashioned dears. Why are one's people always so old-fashioned?'

'There, there, my dear! It's all over now. Think of the big lights. Wealth! Fame! Parties in Beverly Hills!'

'And my art!'

'Yes. Yes. Your art.'

'It comes first. And, of course, doggies.'

'Yes, indeed. My dear Rythym, Miss Windhover loves dogs. Could you possibly——?'

Not too pleased, I took the telephone and called Room Service.

'Some dogs. For Miss Belinda Windhover.'

'Sorry, sir. Pet-shops all shut by now.'

'Do you call this service? Are there none in the hotel?

'Only Myra de Falla's.'

'She's slipping. Send 'em up.'

The page soon arrived with two Borzois, four Scotties, and a pug. Belinda Windhover was delighted. 'Oh, doggies!'

'See how she kisses them, my dear Rythym. You think she will make a star?'

'Listen, Mahound, I can see you're going to spoil that girl.'

'Nonsense. I flatter myself I have a way with people. I want you to take her out, study her psychology, write her a big part.'

'Let her study the part. To hell with her psychology!'

'Oh, come, my dear Rythym!'

'I won't,' said I. 'That's flat.'

'Well! Well! I say, just look at this parquet floor. One of the blocks is loose.'

As I looked, he dislodged a block with his toe. The effect was extraordinary. I seemed to be looking down to an infinite depth, at a vast number of highly animated figures in a flame-coloured setting. Mr. Mahound edged the block into place again, and the vision was gone.

'Phew!'

'What did you say, my dear Rythym?'

'I said, "yes".'

'You will spend the evening with Miss Windhover?'

'Yes.'

'And explore her psychology?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, here are the reporters! Come in, gentlemen! Come in! I want you all to meet Miss Belinda Windhover. She gave up a refined home for her art. Write it down.'

'O.K. We know it. Old-fashioned parents.'

'Well, take a photograph. Here she is, being groomed for stardom in Mahound Pictures Incorporated. Here are her beloved dogs.'

'O.K. We know them. Hallo, Mirza! Hallo, Bobbles! Remember when Nancy North had 'em, boys?'

'She's slipped.'

'And Lucille Lacey. She was always took with the pug.'

'She's slipped, too.'

'Maybe they ain't house-trained. O.K. Frame up. What about this gent?'

'I'm a writer.'

'Fine! You can hold the leg of my tripod. O.K. Shoot! Miss Belinda Windhover. And you're Mr. Mahound?'

'I will tell you my intentions with regard to the renascence of the American Film Industry.'

'Sure. Let's get Belinda with the big white dogs. They're class. Where's your sables, Miss Windhover?'

'Sables for Miss Windhover, my dear Rythym.'

'Yes.' Annoyed, I took up the telephone again.

'Sables.'

'Sorry, sir. Can't buy sables at this hour.'

'What sort of joint is this? Are there none in the hotel?'

'Plenty, sir. There's Miss Pauline Powell's.'

'She's slipping. Bring 'em up.'

Soon the photographs were all taken. The pressmen withdrew.

'Now, young people, I'm going to send you off to make friends with one another.'

'Oh, Mr. Mahound, aren't you coming along?' cried Belinda with an arch pout and wiggle.

'Call me Nicholas, my dear. Tonight, alas, I can't be with you. I've a great deal to attend to.'

'But,' said she, 'do you think I ought to be seen about with a writer?'

'Mr. Rythym is a very distinguished writer, my dear. What's more, he's my right-hand man.'

'Yes, and I'm going to explore your psychology.'

This cheered the future star a little. 'I want to know all about my psychology,' said she as we went down in the elevator. 'I'm not going to be an ordinary actress, Mr. Rythym. I'm going to be intellectual. And at the same time I like nothing better than cooking, just simple things, in a simple play-suit. I'm going to ask Clark Gable, and Katherine Hepburn, when I get properly known, and Gary Cooper, and give them little cookies I bake myself.'

'Fine! Stick to that idea. I like it.'

'And you'll tell me all about my psychology?'

'Sure,' said I. 'We'll go into it together. Come on.'

Next day, I spent a lot of time with Mr. Mahound. His suite was full of orchids and cablegrams.

'People are getting excited,' said he, rubbing his hands.

'Yes.'

'We're going to do great things.'

'Yes.'

'Now, what about our Belinda? Can you fit a part to her psychology?'

'Yes. I'm sure of it.'

'Did she——talk about me at all last night?'

'She did. She thinks you're the cat's pyjamas.'

'The cat's pyjamas, eh? Rythym, we're going to do great things. Great things! Run along.'

I ran along to the restaurant where I was to meet Belinda. She seemed to have acquired poise over-night.

'Mr. Rythym. How do you do?'

'Listen. A film studio is the greatest democracy in the world. You can call me Charlie.'

'Yes, I'm just simple. I like to cook. How's Mr. Mahound?'

'Belinda, he's wild about you.'

'Tell me. Is he one of the *really* great producers?'

'The biggest of all. He's got all the money in the world.'

'Yes, Charlie. But there's one thing money can't always buy, not in England anyway. Or is that just a thought of my own?'

'You mean talent. I can guess your thoughts, Belinda.'

'Don't do that. You see, my people are old-fashioned. I think I'd like to play Juliet.'

'It's been done.'

'Not as I shall do it. You shall write a new script, specially for me.'

'O.K. We'll modernize it. The Capulet apartment is in a New York skyscraper. Romeo's a young G-man, from Harvard, but disguised as a Yale man in order to outwit the gangsters. Capulet's Harvard, you see. It builds for a reconciliation, a happy ending. Romeo's keen on mountain climbing; that builds up the balcony scene. On a skyscraper, you see. Only his name's not Romeo. It's Don.'

'Isn't that making him different?'

'Well, you know what Shakespeare said: "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" '

'Juliet said that.'

'Well, anyway, it showed there were doubts.'

'You're right. I've only just thought of it. Charlie, you write my thoughts in a book on Shakespeare, and I'll sign it. I don't want to be an ordinary actress.'

'You won't. But let's go and join Mahound. He's wild about you.'

'And he's *really* one of the *very* big producers?'

'He is. But, a word in your ear. (God! It's like a shell! A lovely, rosy shell!) I was going to say, remember you've got the talent. Last night you were just a discovery. Today—you are what you are today. You're developing fast. Think in a big way. Don't let anybody cramp your style. Not even Mahound.'

'No. Because of my art. That's sacred.'

'Grand!'

Mr. Mahound, when we entered his suite, took both her hands in his. 'What a very, very lovely thing to do, on the part of a very, very lovely lady, to come and see a poor old film man, in his little hide-out in the Beverly-Ritz!'

'Nicky, Charlie's thought me up a part. Juliet, only better.'

'Splendid. Have you anyone in mind for Romeo, my dear Rythym?'

'Oh, some guy.'

'He's got to climb up the face of a skyscraper, Nicky. For me to do the balcony scene, holding a rose.'

'Will your Hollywood leading men manage that, Rythym? They are not all as young as they might be.'

'Sure. They'll climb anywhere. And look, we've got to work in a Joan of Arc touch to build up the part. She's got to save New York.'

'From what?'

'Gangsters. And listen to the pay-off.'

'What's that?'

'Real bullets.'

'Oh, Rythym! Come, come! After all, there are rules to the game, you know. Even I——'

'Hear me out,' I cried. 'The part demands it. Doesn't it,

Belinda? How's she going to act up, give all she's got, if you let her down on the bullets?'

'I think I ought to have real bullets, Nicky.'

'Of course,' I insisted. 'Do you think Theda Bara would have played Cleopatra without a real pearl?'

'Not a real asp, though,' said Mahound, clutching at a straw.

I twitched it away. 'Yeah, a real asp, only an old one. With its teeth out. You can use old bullets. Say, you can use old gangsters, and let on they died of heart failure.'

'You sound rather tough all of a sudden, my dear Rythym.'

'Tough? You wait till I get on the set!'

'Perhaps the set will have parquet flooring.'

'Yes, perhaps it will,' said I, despondently. 'Perhaps we'll have blank cartridges. Perhaps I'll go out and buy some real pearls instead. Because I'm going to write in a Cleopatra touch, where she comes in rolled up in a carpet.'

'Do so, my dear fellow. We've got a writer of talent, Belinda.'

'Charlie's all right, but he gives way so. Please, Nicky, I want real bullets.'

'Listen, folks,' said I. 'I'm off to buy those pearls. You talk it over.'

On the way back, I was overcome by misgivings. Had I gone too far? Maybe the pearls were a little vulgar. I thought I'd go to my room and see how they looked with two or three of the largest taken from the middle. As I walked along the corridor the elevator came humming down. Mr. Mahound was in it. He saw me. His lips shaped the words, 'She's wonderful!' Then he was gone.

Later on, I went up to his suite. Belinda was there alone, tearing up orchids.

'They look like confetti,' she said. 'I find him a leetle . . . fascinating, your Mr. Mahound.'

I noted her middle-European accent. 'You have your bullets, then?'

'Charlie, we're going to have me save the city from a Red Navy. Real shells.'

'That's right, Belinda honey. Nick's a grand guy. He's a white man, Belinda. He's got background. If I were a girl, I'd think a lot of Nick. But don't forget it; you're the one with the talent.

Don't let anybody cramp your style. You've got a big future, Belinda. Maybe you think you're in the money. Baby, that's chicken feed to what's coming to you, all so long as you don't get your style cramped.'

'You're right, Charlie. It's my art. It's sacred.'

In the evening I saw Mahound alone. 'She's wonderful, Charles! But——I say——'

'Yeah?'

'Did she say anything to you about shells?'

'She said *you'd* said something to her about shells.'

'Maybe I did. In a moment of emotion. It's tough, Charles. Real shells! There'll be trouble. I don't want to be dragged into court.'

'What do you care?'

'I care about my ambitions in pictures. What's more, Charles, I don't like your script. Forgive me, old fellow. It's a grand script, but I don't like it. The fact is, it's too expensive.'

His eyes could not meet mine. I saw that he was ashamed that his millions were not entirely unlimited. I reflected that where vanity of that sort is to be found on one side of a contract there is always hope on the other. I goaded him. 'I thought you had all the money in the world. I thought you were solid. They say "rich as the devil," you know.' He couldn't bear to say frankly he was only *a* devil. He muttered something about a budget being a budget.

'I can do a western,' said I, sarcastically. 'Will you run to a real horse?'

'I've run to a real trap already, my dear Rythym.'

'Maybe you have. Very well, I'll get something on paper.'

Next day I called Belinda early. 'Well, lovey, our script's got panned. I'm writing you a little old period piece in a small-town setting. You wear one of those big bonnets that hide the face.'

'Charlie, you don't say so! I want to come in in a carpet, with three big pearls.'

'The pearls are out, ducky. There's an economy ramp on. Listen, even your shells are gone. It's you and a horse.'

'Don't write a word, Charlie. Wait till I've seen Nick.'

After lunch, the telephone summoned me to Mr. Mahound. Belinda was there, flushed and radiant.

'Real shells, Charlie!'

'And bells, Charles. Belinda and I are going to be married. Isn't that so, sweetie?'

'Yes, and I'm going to have real shells.'

'Real battleships, too,' said I. 'How about that for an idea? Let me put 'em in the script. Coming up the Hudson, blazing away! My present to the bride.'

'Do you hear what he says, Nick? Oh, Charlie, you *can* write! Real battleships!'

'I'm afraid Charles is joking, my dear. He likes jokes about blazing away. But you and I—let's talk about our wedding.'

'All right, Nicky. We'll fly to New York. We'll go to the Little Church Around the Corner.'

'Did you say the little *judge* around the corner?'

'No, honey, the Little *Church.*'

'Not for us, honey. Us for a quiet wedding, in front of a judge.'

'What? Who do you think I am? Your chattel? Your slave? Am I a film star, or not?'

'But a good little wife, too, honey. Remember you're a simple girl. Doggies——cookies——Her fans want her to be an ideal little wife, don't they, Charles?'

'Yes, Nicky. But I'm not signed up for the wife part yet awhile. I'm not acting any part before I'm signed up for it. Mummy said a girl shouldn't ever act like a wife till she is one. She's old-fashioned. Why are one's people so old-fashioned?'

'I'm old-fashioned, too, dear,' said Nick. 'I can't go to the Little Church Around the Corner. I should sink through the floor. Look, darling, make it just a plain judge, and maybe I can stretch a little on budget. Maybe I'll get you a battleship or two.'

'Well, don't forget you've promised.'

'What a relief! What happiness!' cried he. 'Real happiness! Let's start at once.'

'Linda,' I whispered, while he was telephoning for a plane. 'Don't forget your prestige. Make it a good long honeymoon. Two months at least, honey, or the world'll think there's something wrong with your glamour.'

'You're right, Charlie. I will.'

So they went to Yuma. After some weeks I got a telegram. '*Home on Friday. Love. Nick and Linda.*' Soon afterwards came

another. *'Confidential. Can you possibly outline alternative script? Western, South Sea, or other simple natural background. Repeat confidential. Nick.'*

After some thought I drafted a rather humourous farm story, of the sort that made Mabel Normand in the good old days. I thought it would hardly appeal to Belinda, but I was under contract. Orders were orders.

I was at the airport to meet them. Linda alighted first, and was at once seized on by the press. I heard the words *husband, doggies, cookies.*

'Charles,' whispered Mahound. 'A word in your ear. Have you got that outline? That rough script?'

'Yes. I've got it. What's the matter? Are you stalling on the real battleships?'

'Charles, she wants the real New York.'

'Well! Well! Well! Never mind. I've got a farm story. She can have real striped stockings.'

'She thinks big, Charles. She may feel it rather a letdown after the real New York.'

'Don't worry. You go off to the hotel. Everything's fixed up for you. I'll look in after supper.'

Late that evening I went round to see them. Something told me that all was not harmony in the romantic ménage. Mahound was frowning over a heap of bills.

'You've bought a lot of rather impressive orchids, Charles,' said he, in a worried tone.

'Nothing's too good for you and Linda,' said I, smiling. 'You're my best friends in pictures.'

'Yes, but it all goes down on the expense account.'

'There you are again, dear? cried Linda. 'He's got all mean and stingy, Charlie. He says he can't afford to buy me New York. For the bombardment scene. Where I save it. *I* can't act in front of a lot of paste-board, Charlie. You tell him.'

'There's something in that, Nick,' said I. 'Still, listen, Linda, I've got a new script for you. That part's sort of lovable. Farm. Birds singing. Real birds, Hens too. You come in scattering the corn. With comedy stockings on. Real stockings. Real comedy.'

'Nick, is this just a bad joke, to welcome me home?'

'Now, listen, honey,' said Nick. 'Give the writer a chance. He's put his life's blood into this story. Go on, Charlie.'

'That's true, Linda. There's smiles and tears in this script.'

'Smiles?'

'Where you get a sock in the puss with a custard pie. A real——'

'Say. What have you got lined up for me next? A burlesque act? I'm out. I'm through.'

'Joan of Arc started on a farm, honey.'

'Joan of Arc never got no custard pie.'

'She got worse that that, milking the cows, sweetie,' said Nick. 'I was there. I fixed it.'

'What do you mean, you were there?' cried Belinda. 'Are you starting in lying to me already? I'll fly to Reno. No, I won't, though. Don't forget what you put in my contract, out in Yuma. I've got to O.K. every script.'

'Well, sweetie, Charles'll write you one you'll really like. Maybe where you're a young girl, mad to get on the stage. Then you can do your Juliet speech at a party. Where there's a big producer.'

'No, he won't.'

'Yes, he will.'

'No, he won't. That's flat.'

'Yes, he will,' said Mahound. 'A lovely script. A part that'll make you drive the whole world crazy. The real world. Won't you, Charles?'

'Well, as a matter of fact,' said I. 'I won't.'

'What?'

'Look at the clock. Didn't you hear it strike twelve?'

'What of it?'

'Well, Nick,' said I, 'it's two months. Today—but now it's yesterday—my first option came up for renewal. I'm afraid you've let it slip by. I'm free!'

'Hell! I could sink through the floor!'

'Nicky, you got to sign a writer who'll put me in New York. And parts for my doggies.'

'Youre doggies are dead,' I told her. 'They ate your cookies.'

'Ow! Charlie! My doggies!'

'I could sink through the floor!' muttered Nick. 'To slip up on an option!'

'Yeah,' said I. 'You've slipped. Sink away.'

'I will, too,' cried he, stamping his foot.

And with that he seized Belinda, and, WHOOSH, they were gone through the floor.

I chose one of the smaller orchids for a button hole, and went off to a night club. Next day I returned to Malibu.

Romance Lingers, Adventure Lives

THERE is a great deal of devilry in a bright and windy midnight in the month of March. A little naked moon rides high over Fairlawn Avenue in the heart of the Sweetholme building development. The new houses are chalk-masked by its light, except for their darkened windows, which glare broodingly, like deep-set eyes, or the sockets of eyes. There are some young almond trees, which ordinarily look as if drawn by a childish hand. Now, as the wind sets their weak branches gibbering, they seem like shamanistic scratches on the white bone of the brittle bright night.

The wind causes a man to tuck his chin into his coat collar, to become a mere rag, curved against the wind. His bowler-hatted moon shadow, apparently cut from a sheet of tin, scythes its way implacably through the asphalt, and seems the better man of the two, probably the real man, the genuine Mr. Watkins. Around the bend, just out of sight, comes another figure, bowler-hatted also, scythe-curved also, also chopping its way through the icy air. It might be the shadow of the shadow. It might be Death. It is, however, only Mr. Gosport.

The carriage from which he alighted out of the midnight train was the farthest from the station barrier. Also, his shoe-lace came undone. There is an explanation for everything; sometimes two explanations. These two explain why Mr. Gosport was a hundred yards or so behind Mr. Watkins.

Mr. Watkins, with his little grin slipped in like a scarf-pin behind his upturned lapels, observed with a stare of desolate and hopeless superiority the monotony of the houses on Fairlawn Avenue. This was the vilest ingratitude, for the uniformity was due to the fact that each was the best possible house at the figure. Watkins, however, having drunk and sung away the Saturday evening in exclusively male company, was full of blood and villainly, intolerant of caution and incapable of gratitude. He decided that on Monday he would rob the bank at which he

was employed, and fly to South America, where he would set up a seraglio.

How different were the thoughts of Mr. Gosport, as out of sight, around the bend, he sheared his way into the wind and also regarded the monotony of Fairlawn Avenue! The good Gosport fully realized that each house was the best possible at the price; he knew that each chalky bump was a vertebra in the backbone of the country; he had read that the life of the little man was as full of romance and high adventure as that of any buccaneer of old; columnists had told him that the Fairlawn Avenues of the world are its very jewels, its necklaces of simple joys and sorrows, its rosaries in which each well-matched home is a pearl. The only trouble was, he had no great fondness for jewelry, and wished that he was dead. 'I am unfit to appreciate the best of all possible lives in the best of all possible building developments,' said he. 'Tomorrow I will put my affairs in order, and be specially nice to Milly. On Monday I will go far away, to where there are trees larger than these little almond trees, and I will hang myself upon the branch of one of them.'

Watkins, away ahead, roller-coastered in imagination over the curves of his future seraglio. He was brought to a halt by the appearance of a dim light behind a hall door. 'Here we are,' said he. He went up the little path and opened the door, and was at once received into the warmth of domesticity. He was greeted by the beauty of a three-piece hallway set of a pattern very popular on Fairlawn Avenue.

In a moment, the vigorous Watkins had hung hat and coat upon the peg, switched out the hall light, and was creeping up the stairs to bed.

Still out in the cold, still shearing with sensitive nose the arctic currents of the wind, Mr. Gosport passed the now darkened house. Four doors farther up, his watering eyes perceived a dim light behind a hall-door pane. 'Here I am!' said he with a sigh.

Upstairs in the first house, treading soft so as not to wake his sleeping wife, Watkins flung off his clothing, expanded his chest, scratched his rump, donned his pyjamas, and slipped into the bed. His wife acknowledged his entry with a muted whinny.

Here were two human caterpillars, immobile in a cotton

cocoon, awaiting the pupescence of sleep, the wings of dream.

There is, however, a great deal of devilry at midnight on a Saturday. What was the influence that drew the lady up from sleep like Sheba's queen from darkest Africa, and reclaimed the gentleman like Solomon from the contemplation of his seraglio? Was it that which had been moribund three years, or was it something totally different? It felt like something totally different.

Something very much the same—that is to say, something totally different—was happening at the very same time to Mr. Gosport.

Both couples slept late on Sunday morning, and when they woke the ladies did what they had not done since honeymoon days. That is to say, they rose smiling in the darkness of the curtained rooms, and hastened downstairs to prepare a morning cup of coffee.

Watkins, waking to full consciousness, heard the clink of crockery below. He smiled, stretched, sniffed, expanded his chest, and with a coy smile abandoned himself to a warm flood of happiness. This, like a Gulf Stream, bore his thoughts away from South America and set the almonds all a-blossoming on Fairlawn Avenue.

Watkins descended the stairs, and entered the little kitchen. There was the steaming coffee; there was a beloved figure in a fresh and flowery wrapper, bending over the gas stove. He bestowed a jovial but appreciative pinch, and took up the newspaper.

'How manly!' thought she.

At the same moment Mr. Gosport was descending the stairs, and in a similar mood. To him also was accorded the scent of new-made coffee, and the sight of a sweet figure in flowered wrapper bending over the stove. He bestowed a lingering and grateful kiss just where the hair twirls in little tendrils at the back of the neck, and he also took up the newspaper.

'How refined!' thought she.

'Hey, what's this?' said Mr. Watkins, when he had sipped his coffee, and skimmed smilingly over an account of a fugitive bank clerk being arrested at Southampton. 'Hey, what's this?

Where is the true detective story feature in this Sunday's *Telegram?*'

'That is not the *Telegram,*' said the lady, turning in surprise from the stove. 'And you,' said she on a rising note, 'And you are not my husband.'

With that she fell to the floor, in a faint of the third intensity. 'I got into the wrong house last night,' murmured Watkins. 'I had better get off home.'

He quickly assembled his clothes and left the house. On his way along the Avenue he passed Mr. Gosport, with whom he was unacquainted. Each was too busy concocting an excuse for staying in town overnight, to take any notice of the other.

Mr. Watkins found Mrs. Watkins, and Mr. Gosport found Mrs. Gosport, highly agitated at the unaccountable absence of their husbands, and too relieved at their return to scrutinize very closely the likelihood of the excuses they made.

They each had a nice little cut of beef for their Sunday lunch, and after lunch they took a nap, while their wives looked out of the window. Their dreams were not unpleasant, and when they woke, Fairlawn Avenue no longer seemed so monotonous as to justify resort to crime or suicide. How long this cheerful mood would have lasted without reinforcement it is impossible to say. Fortunately Mrs. Gosport shortly afterwards made the acquaintance of Mrs. Watkins while seeking a stray kitten, and the two families became the greatest of friends, and spent most of their evenings, their week-ends, and their summer holidays together.

This happy relationship altogether banished monotony from Fairlawn Avenue, and it would have persisted to this day, had not a slight coolness arisen last spring owing to Mr. Gosport refusing Mr. Watkins the loan of his lawn mower.

The Steel Cat

THE Hotel Bixbee is as commercial an hotel as any in Chicago. The brass-rail surmounts the banisters; the cuspidor gleams dimly in the shade of the potted palm. The air in the corridors is very still, and appears to have been deodorized a few days ago. The rates are moderate.

Walter Davies's cab drew up outside the Bixbee. He was a man with a good deal of grey in his hair, and with a certain careworn brightness on his face, such as is often to be seen on the faces of rural preachers, if they are poor enough and hopeful enough. Davies, however, was not a preacher.

The porter seized his suitcase, and would have taken the black box he held on his knees, but Davies nervously put out his hand. 'No,' he said. 'Leave this one to me.'

He entered the hotel carrying the box as if it were a baby. It was an oblong box, nearly two feet long, and perhaps a foot wide and a foot in depth. It was covered with a high-grade near-leather. It had a handle on the top side, but Davies preferred to cradle it in his arms rather than to swing it by the handle.

As soon as he had checked in and was shown to his room, he set the box on the bureau and made straight for the telephone. He called Room Service. 'This is Room 517,' said he. 'What sort of cheese have you?'

'Well, we got Camembert, Swiss, Tillamook——'

'Now, the Tillamook,' said Davies. 'Is that good and red-looking?'

'Guess so,' said the man at the other end. 'It's like it usually is.'

'All right, send me up a portion.'

'What bread with it? Roll? White? Rye?'

'No bread. Just the cheese by itself.'

'Okay. It'll be right up.'

In a minute or two a bell-hop entered, carrying a platter with the wedge of cheese on it. He was a coloured man of about the same age as Davies, and had a remarkably round face and a

bullet head. 'Is that right, sir? You wanted just a piece of cheese?'

'That's right,' said Davies, who was undoing the clasps of his black box. 'Put it right there on the table.'

The bell-hop, waiting for him to sign the check, watched Davies fold down the front side of the box, which carried part of the top with it. Thus opened, it displayed an interior lined with black velvet, against which gleamed an odd-looking skeletal arrangement in chromium-plated metal. 'Now look at that!' said the bell-hop, much intrigued. 'Wouldn't be surprised if that ain't an *invention* you've got there.'

'Interesting, eh?' said Davies. 'Catches the eye?'

'Sure does,' said the bell-hop. 'There ain't nothing much more interesting than an invention.' He peered reverently at the odd-looking apparatus in the box. 'Now what sort of invention would you say that might be?'

'That,' said Davies proudly, 'is the Steel Cat.'

'Steel Cat?' cried the bell-hop. 'No kidding?'

He shook his head, a plain man baffled by the wonders of science. 'So that's the Steel Cat! Well now, what do you know?'

'Good name, you think?' asked Davies.

'Boy, that's a *title!*' replied the bell-hop. 'Mister, how come I ain't never heard of this here Steel Cat?'

'That's the only one in the world,' said Davies. 'So far.'

'I come from Ohio,' said the bell-hop. 'And I got folks in Ohio. And they're going to hear from me how I got to see this one and only Steel Cat.'

'Glad you like it,' said Davies. 'Wait a minute! Fond of animals? I'll show you something.'

As he spoke, he opened a small compartment that was built into one end of the box. Inside was a round nest of toilet tissues. Davies put his finger against this nest. 'Come on, Georgie,' he said. 'Peep! Peep! Come on, Georgie!'

A small, ordinary mouse, fat as a butter-ball, thrust his quick head out of the nest, turned his berry-black eyes in all directions, and ran along Davies's finger, and up his sleeve to his collar, where he craned up to touch his nose to the lobe of Davies's ear.

'Well, sir!' cried the bell-hop in delight. 'If that ain't a proper tame, friendly mouse you got there!'

'He knows me,' said Davies. 'In fact, this mouse knows pretty near everything.'

'I betcha!' said the bell-hop with conviction.

'He's what you might call a demonstration mouse,' said Davies. 'He shows off the Steel Cat. See the idea? You hang the bait on this hook. Mr. Mouse marches up this strip in the middle. He reaches for the bait. His weight tips the beam, and he drops into this jar. Of course, I fill it with water.'

'And that's his name—Georgie?' asked the bell-hop, his eyes still on the mouse.

'That's what I call him,' said Davies.

'You know what?' said the bell-hop thoughtfully. 'If I had that mouse, mister, I reckon I'd call him Simpson.'

'D'you know how I came to meet up with this mouse?' said Davies. 'I was in Poughkeepsie—that's where I come from—and one night last winter I ran my bath, and somehow I sat on, reading the paper, and forgot all about it. And I felt something sort of urging me to go into the bathroom. So I went in, and there was the bath I'd forgotten all about. And there was Master Georgie in it, just about going down for the third time.'

'Hey! Hey!' cried the bell-hop in urgent distress. 'No third time for President Simpson!'

'Oh, no!' said Davies. 'Life-guard to the rescue! I picked him out, dried him, and I put him in a box.'

'Can you beat that?' cried the bell-hop. 'Say, would it be all right for me to give him just a little bit of the cheese?'

'No. That's just demonstration cheese,' said Davies. 'Mice aren't so fond of cheese as most people think. He has his proper meal after the show. A balanced diet. Well, as I was saying, in a couple of days he was just as friendly as could be.'

'Sure thing,' said the bell-hop. '*He* knows who saved him.'

'You know, a thing like that, said Davies, 'it starts a fellow thinking. And what I thought of—I thought of the Steel Cat.'

'You thought of that cat from seeing that mouse in that bath?' cried the bell-hop, overwhelmed by the processes of the scientific mind.

'I did,' said Davies. 'I owe it all to Georgie. Drew it up on paper. Borrowed some money. Got a blueprint made; then this model

here. And now we're going around together, demonstrating. Cleveland, Akron, Toledo—everywhere. Now here.'

'Just about sweeping the country,' said the bell-hop. 'That's a real good-luck mouse, that is. He certainly ought to be called Simpson.'

'Well, I'll tell you,' said Davies. 'It needs one really big concern to give the others a lead. Otherwise, they hang back. That's why we're in Chicago. Do you know who's coming here this afternoon? Mr. Hartpick of Lee and Waldron. They don't only manufacture; they own the outlets. Six hundred and fifty stores, all over the country! No middle-man, if you see what I mean. If they push it, oh boy!'

'Oh, boy!' echoed the bell-hop with enthusiasm.

'He'll be here pretty soon,' said Davies. 'Three o'clock. By appointment. And Georgie'll show him the works.'

'He don't never balk?' inquired the bell-hop. 'He ain't afraid of being drowned?'

'Not Georgie,' said Davies. 'He trusts me.'

'Ah, that's it!' said the bell-hop. 'He trusts you.'

'Of course I make the water luke-warm for him,' said Davies. 'All the same, it takes some character in a mouse to take the dip every time like that. Never mind—if he puts this deal over, we get him a little collar made.'

'Mister,' cried the bell-hop, 'I want to see that mouse in that collar. You ought to get his photo taken. You could give it to anybody. They could send it back home to their families. Yes, sir, their folks 'ud sure be tickled to death to see a photo of that mouse in that collar.'

'Maybe I will,' said Davies, smiling.

'You do that thing, mister,' said the bell-hop. 'Well, I got to be getting. Goodbye, Georgie!' He went out, but at once reopened the door. 'All the same,' he said, 'if I had that mouse I sure would call him Simpson.'

Davies, left alone, set out his apparatus to advantage, washed, even shaved, and powdered his face with talcum. When he had nothing more to do, he took out his bill-fold, and laid six dollar bills one by one on the top of the bureau, counting them out as if he had hoped to find there were seven. He added thirty-five cents from one pocket, and a nickel from another. 'We've got to

put it over this time,' said he to the mouse, who was watching him brightly from the top of the box. 'Never get down-hearted, Georgie! That gang of short-sighted, narrow-minded, small-town buyers, they just don't mean a thing. This fellow's the guy that counts. And he's our last chance. So do your stuff well, pal, and we'll be on top of the world yet.'

Suddenly the telephone rang. Davies snatched it up. 'Mr. Hartpick to see you,' said the desk-clerk.

'Send Mr. Hartpick up right away,' said Davies.

He stowed away the money, put Georgie back in his nest, and dried his moist palms on his handkerchief. He remembered, just as the tap came on the door, to banish the anxious expression from his face and put on a genial smile.

Mr. Hartpick was a square and heavy man, with fingers twice as thick as ordinary fingers, and the lower joints of them were covered with wiry, reddish hair.

'Mr. Hartpick,' said Davies. 'I certainly appreciate your coming up here like this.'

'Long as I'm not wasting my time,' returned Mr. Hartpick. 'Let's see the goods. I got a rough idea from your letter.'

Davies had set the box on the table. Now getting behind it, he attempted a persuasive, hearty, salesmanlike tone. 'Mr. Hartpick, you know the old adage about the better mouse-trap. You've been good enough to beat a path to my door, and——'

'Show me an idea, and I'll beat a path to it,' said Mr. Hartpick. 'However nutty it sounds.'

'——and here,' said Davies, 'is the Steel Cat.' With that he flung open the box.

'Selling name!' said Hartpick. 'Might be able to use the name, anyway.'

'Mr. Hartpick, the idea is this,' said Davies, beginning to count off his points on his fingers. 'More mice caught. More humanely. No mutilation of mice as with inferior traps. No mess. No springs to catch the fingers. Some women are just scared to death of those springs. No family disagreements, Mr. Hartprick. That's an important angle. I've gone into that angle psychologically.'

His visitor paused in the rooting out of a back tooth, and stared at Davies. 'Eh?' said he.

'Psychologically,' said Davies. 'The feminine angle, the mas-

culine angle. Now, the wife doesn't generally like to see a cat playing with a mouse.'

'She can poison 'em,' said Hartpick.

'That's what *she* says,' said Davies. 'That's the woman angle. Poisoners throughout the ages. Lucrezia Borgia—lots of 'em. But a good many husbands are allergic to having their wives playing around with poison. I think a nation-wide poll would show most husbands prefer a cat. Remember, it was Nero—a man—fed the Christians to the lions. So that starts an argument. Besides, you've got to put a cat out, get it fed when on vacation.'

'Any mice *we* catch, the missus flushes 'em down the toilet,' said Mr. Hartpick with a shrug.

'Feminine angle again,' said Davies. 'Cleopatra fed her slaves to the crocodiles. Only many women haven't the level-headedness of Mrs. Hartpick to take a mouse out of a trap and get rid of it that way.'

'Oh, I dunno,' said Mr. Hartpick in tones of complete boredom.

'In one way this is the same sort of thing,' said Davies. beginning to talk very fast. 'Only more scientific and labour-saving. See—I fill the glass jar here with water, luke-warm water. It's glass in this demonstration model. In the selling product it'd be tin to keep the cost down to what I said in my letter. The frame needn't be chromium either. Well, having filled it, I place it right here in position. Kindly observe the simplicity. I take a morsel of ordinary cheese, and I bait the hook. If economy's the object, a piece of bread rubbed in bacon fat is equally effective. Now look! Please look, Mr. Hartpick! I'll show you what the mouse does. Come on, Georgie!'

'Live mouse, eh?' observed Hartpick, with a flicker of interest.

'*Mus domesticus*, the domestic mouse,' said Davies. 'Found in every home. Now watch him! He's found the way in! See him go along that strip in the middle! Right to the bait—see? His weight tilts the——'

'He's in!' cried Hartpick, his interest entirely regained.

'And the trap,' said Davies triumphantly, 'has automatically set itself for another mouse. In the morning you just remove the dead ones.'

'Not bad!' said Hartpick. 'Gosh—he's trying to swim! My friend, I think you may have something there.'

'You know the old adage, Mr. Hartpick,' said Davies, smiling. 'It's the better mouse-trap!'

'Like hell it is!' said Hartpick. 'Pure nut, that's what it is. But what I always say—there's a nut market for nut inventions. Play up the humane angle—get the old dames het up——'

'Gee, that's great!' said Davies. 'I was beginning to— Well, never mind! Excuse me! I'll just get him out.'

'Wait a minute,' said Hartpick, putting his heavy hand on Davies's wrist.

'I think he's getting a bit tired,' said Davies.

'Now look, said Hartpick, still watching the mouse. 'We've got our standard contract for notions of this sort. Standard rate of royalties. Ask your attorney if you like; he'll tell you the same thing.'

'Oh, that'll be all right, I'm sure,' said Davies. 'Just let me——'

'Hold on! Hold on!' said Hartpick. 'We're talking business, ain't we?'

'Why, sure,' said Davies uneasily. 'But he's getting tired. You see, he's a demonstration mouse.'

Mr. Hartpick's hand seemed to grow heavier. 'And what's this?' he demanded. 'A demonstration—or what?'

'A demonstration? Yes,' said Davies.

'Or are you trying to put something over on me?' said Hartpick. 'How do I know he won't climb out? I was *going* to suggest you step around to the office in the morning, and we sign. If you're interested, that is.'

'Of course, I'm interested,' said Davies, actually trembling. 'But——'

'Well, if you're interested,' said Hartpick, 'let him alone.'

'But, my God, he's drowning!' cried Davies, tugging to free his wrist. Mr. Hartpick turned his massive face toward Davies for a moment, and Davies stopped tugging.

'The show,' said Hartpick, 'goes on. There you are! Look! Look! He's going!' His hand fell from Davies's arm. 'Going! Going! Gone! Poor little bastard! Okay, Mr. Davies, let's say ten-thirty o'clock then, in the morning.'

With that he strode out. Davies stood stock-still for a little, and then moved toward the Steel Cat. He put out his hand to take up the jar, but turned abruptly away and walked up and

down the room. He had been doing this for some time when there came another tap on the door. Davies must have said 'come in,' though he wasn't aware of doing so. At all events the bell-hop entered, carrying a covered platter on a tray. 'Excuse me,' said he, smiling all over his face. 'It's on the house, sir. Buttered corn-cob for Brother George Simpson!'

In the Cards

THE Vascal System is the most reliable, the most up-to-date, and the most scientific method of foretelling the future by cards. It is true the operator cannot tell his own fortune, but that drawback seems to be common to all methods, and in every other way the successes of the Vascal System have been prodigious.

A wife, who studied Vascal in her spare time, laid out the cards for her husband on the breakfast table. She revealed to him that he would be involved in an unfortunate collision, and suffer a severe shock at the very least, if by any chance he drove his car home between three and five that afternoon. He now regularly desires his wife to lay out the cards for him, and never drives home before the hour she announces as propitious, with the result that he is almost the only person in the whole neighbourhood who has not been considerably shocked during the period in question.

A young girl, holder of a Grade A Vascal Diploma, was able to warn her still younger sister that she might that evening expect to lose something she had possessed all her life, through the agency of a tall, dark man, but, though this would cause her some little distress at the outset, it would in the end lead to lasting happiness and satisfaction. Sure enough, the young sister left for a blind date that evening in such haste that she forgot to lock the door behind her. A tall, dark sneak thief, entering, took away her baby seed-pearl necklace, which was a tatty little number anyway, and she was successful in gypping the insurance people for at least three times its value, and bought that very same rhinestone clip which first attracted the attention of Mr. Jerry Horrabin, now her fiancé.

Mr. Brewster, when only half-way through the Vascal Course, laid out the cards for his wife, and told her she would be wrong to insist on going to the theatre that evening, because the show would stink. She did insist, and it did stink.

Convinced by these, and by scores of other unsolicited testi-

monials, Myra Wilkins decided she could hardly do better than enrol as a student. Her idea was a big one; she meant to play her cards properly. She considered that sooner or later, among the numerous young men who would flock to consult her, she would strike one for whom she could foresee an enormous fortune arriving in the near future from some unsuspected source. She had no intention of unsettling this happy young man by telling him what the future held, but thought rather she might warn him against any Queens of Hearts or Diamonds with whom he might be involved, and guide him gently toward a marriage with a high-grade Spade, for Myra was a brunette.

She graduated with the highest honours, and set up in a shadowy little nook in the West Forties, above the establishment of a dancing instructress with whom she was acquainted. She figured that young men who suddenly took dancing lessons often had a great yearning to know what the future held for them, and she hoped these would form the nucleus of a clientele.

Myra had very little capital, and this was exhausted in furnishing her nook with bead-curtains, witch balls, images of Buddha, and similar junk, to create a convincing atmosphere for her visitors. She set her fee very low, in order to get the widest possible range of clients, and thus increase her chances of finding a future millionaire among them.

She shuffled and spread her greasy pack of cards, foretelling for innumerable insignificant young men the details of futures that were little better than pasts, which of course they would become one of these days. As far as the imminent fortune was concerned, the whole business was like a game of solitaire that never came out. The average future wealth of her clients was somewhat about the Two of Diamonds, and work and worry loomed up like a grand slam.

The months stretched on into years, and the dust lay thick upon the witch ball and the Buddha. Myra had nothing but her dreams of wealth, and these, like an old knife, were sharpened to a razor keenness. At last, late one afternoon, when the shadows were at their deepest, the stairway groaned beneath a heavy tread, and a hulking figure tried to get four ways at once through the bead-curtain that screened her alcove.

The new customer was an ugly one, and a more prosperous

fortune teller would probably have sent him straight back to the Zoo. Myra, however, could not afford to pass up a dollar, so she wearily laid out her pack. The Two of Clubs frisked around fairly actively in the near foreground, in a context that gave it the significance of a copper's night stick. She saw he was in some danger of visiting a large building, full of men in strange clothes, but vaguer influences seemed to indicate a postponement of this necessity.

Suddenly she had to repress a cry that rose unbidden to her lips. It was as if his future, dark as a cannibal king, had smiled, and revealed a golden tooth. Vascal declared unequivocally that a handsome fortune was coming to this young man on the death of someone very near to him.

'Have you any relations?' she asked. 'Any near relations, I mean, who are well off?'

'No,' said he. 'Not unless Uncle Joe soaked anything away before they got him.'

'That must be it,' she thought. 'Well,' she said aloud, 'it doesn't matter much. There's no sign of any uncle leaving you anything. This card means money troubles. This means you're double-crossed by a blonde. Looks like you're beaten up, too. I don't know what these two men in uniform are doing.'

She continued prattling and laying out the cards, her mind working meanwhile like a three-ring circus. One ring was taken up with the story she was telling to her visitor, the second in reading the real future as it unfolded itself, and the third in wondering what she was going to do about it.

She stole another glance at her unattractive client. The fortune as far as she could judge, appeared to be rather more than a million. Her visitor, on the other hand, seemed a good deal less than human. Myra had not expected romance, but there are things which make a nice girl hesitate, and he was one of them.

While she pondered she was still automatically laying out the cards. Suddenly her eyes brightened. She looked again. It was true! All her troubles were ended. The cards indicated, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that her client would die of a sudden, violent shock within a few months of inheriting the money. This made quite an eligible bachelor of him.

Myra at once began her manœuvres. 'You seem,' said she, 'to be at the parting of the ways. One road leads to misery, poverty, sickness, despair, prison——'

'I'll take the other,' said the young man.

'You show great powers of judgement,' said Myra. 'But I can tell you it is not as easy as all that. The other road, which leads to riches and happiness, can only be travelled hand in hand with a good woman. Do you know a good woman?'

'Oh, phooey!' said her client in dismay.

'What a pity!' said Myra. 'Because if you did, and if she was dark, and not bad-looking, and wore a number-five shoe, all you'd have to do would be to marry her, and you'd be rich for life. Very rich. Look—here it is. Money, money, money—coming to you from someone very near to you. If you marry that girl, that is. Look—this card means you at the Waldorf. Look—this is you at Palm Beach. Here you are at Saratoga. Gosh! You've backed a big winner!'

'Say, lady,' said her client. 'What size shoe do *you* wear?'

'Well,' said Myra with a smile, 'I *can* squeeze into a four. But usually——'

'Look, baby,' said he, taking her hand. 'It's you and me. Like that. See?' With that he extended his other hand with two fingers crossed, as an emblem of connubial bliss.

Myra controlled a shudder. 'When he's dead,' thought she, 'I'll have a million, and get me one of these young film stars, in order to forget!'

Soon afterwards they were married, and took a small shack in an unprepossessing part of Long Island. Lew appeared to have strong reasons for living in inconspicuous retirement. Myra commuted, and drudged harder than ever with her greasy pack of cards, in order to keep them both until death did them part, leaving her a rich widow.

As time went on, and the fortune still failed to materialize, she was bitterly reproached by her hulking husband, whose stunted mind was as impatient as a child's, and who began to fear he had been married under false pretences. He was also a little sadistic.

'Maybe you ain't the right dame after all,' said he, pinching her black and blue. 'Maybe you don't wear a five. Maybe you

wear a six. Gimme a divorce and let me marry another dark dame. The money don't come along, and you're black and blue anyway. I don't like a black and blue dame. Come on, Gimme a divorce.'

'I won't,' said she. 'I believe marriages are made in Heaven.'

This would lead to an argument, for he claimed to have evidence to the contrary. In the end his brutish wits would be baffled; he would fling her to the ground with a curse, and go into the back yard, where he would dig an enormously deep hole, into which he would gaze for a long time, and then fill it in again.

This continued for some months, and Myra herself began to wonder if the Vascal System could possibly have let her down. 'Supposing he doesn't come into the money! Here I am—Mrs. King Kong, and working for it! Maybe I'd better get that divorce after all.'

These defeatist notions came to a head one gloomy winter evening as she trudged home from the ferry. Crossing the dark yard of the shack, she stumbled into another of the enormous holes dug by her simple-minded husband. 'That settles it,' thought she.

When she entered the squalid kitchen, Lew greeted her with an unusual smile. 'Hello, sweetie,' said he. 'How's my darling little wifie tonight?'

'Cut the sweetie stuff out,' said she tersely. 'And the wifie stuff, too. I don't know what's bit you, you big gorilla, but my mind's made up. You can have that divorce after all.'

'Don't talk like that, honey,' said he. 'I was only joking. I wouldn't divorce you, not for all the world.'

'No, but I'll divorce you,' said she. 'And quick.'

'You gotta have grounds for that,' observed her husband, with a frown.

'I've got 'em,' said she. 'When I show that judge where I'm black and blue, I'll get my divorce pronto. I'm sitting pretty.'

'Listen,' said he. 'Have a look at this letter that came for you. Maybe you'll change your mind.'

'Why did you open my letter?' said Myra.

'To see what was inside,' said he with the utmost candour. 'Go on, read it.'

'Uncle Ezra,' cried Myra, staring at the letter. 'Left a million and a half dollars! All to me! Gee, the old geezer must have made good! But say, the cards must have slipped up, then. It was supposed to come to you.'

'Never mind,' said Lew, stroking the back of her neck. 'Man and wife are one, ain't they?'

'Not for long,' cried Myra in triumph. 'I'm rich! I'm free! Or I will be.'

'And what shall *I* do?' asked her husband.

'Go climb a tree,' said Myra. 'You ought to be good at it.'

'I thought you might say that,' said he, clasping her firmly around the throat. 'Gypped me a dollar for that fortune too, didn't you? Well, if you won't do right by me, the cards must. Death to someone very near to me—that's what they said, didn't they? So they was right after all!'

Myra had no breath left to pay testimony to the Vascal System, or to warn him of the sudden, violent shock that awaited him.

Wet Saturday

It was July. In the large, dull house they were imprisoned by the swish and the gurgle and all the hundred sounds of rain. They were in the drawing-room, behind four tall and weeping windows, in a lake of damp and faded chintz.

This house, ill-kept and unprepossessing, was necessary to Mr. Princey, who detested his wife, his daughter, and his hulking son. His life was to walk through the village, touching his hat, not smiling. His cold pleasure was to recapture snapshot memories of the infinitely remote summers of his childhood—coming into the orangery and finding his lost wooden horse, the tunnel in the box hedge, and the little square of light at the end of it. But now all this was threatened—his austere pride of position in the village, his passionate attachment to the house—and all because Millicent, his cloddish daughter Millicent, had done this shocking and incredibly stupid thing. Mr. Princey turned form her in revulsion and spoke to his wife.

'They'd send her to a lunatic asylum,' he said. 'A criminal-lunatic asylum. We should have to move away. It would be impossible.'

His daughter began to shake again. 'I'll kill myself,' she said.

'Be quiet,' said Mr. Princey. 'We have very little time. No time for nonsense. I intend to deal with this.' He called to his son, who stood looking out of the window. 'George, come here. Listen. How far did you get with your medicine before they threw you out as hopeless?'

'You know as well as I do,' said George.

'Do you know enough—did they drive enough into your head for you to be able to guess what a competent doctor could tell about such a wound?'

'Well, it's a—it's a knock or blow.'

'If a tile fell from the roof? Or a piece of the coping?'

'Well, guv'nor, you see, it's like this——'

'Is it possible?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Oh, because she hit him several times.'

'I can't stand it,' said Mrs. Princey.

'You have got to stand it, my dear,' said her husband. 'And keep that hysterical note out of your voice. It might be overheard. We are talking about the weather. If he fell down the well, George, striking his head several times?'

'I really don't know, guv'nor.'

'He'd have had to hit the sides several times in thirty or forty feet, and at the correct angles. No, I'm afraid not. We must go over it all again, Millicent.'

'No! No!'

'Millicent, we must go over it all again. Perhaps you have forgotten something. One tiny irrelevant detail may save or ruin us. Particularly you, Millicent. You don't *want* to be put in an asylum, do you? Or be hanged? They might hang you, Millicent. You must stop that shaking. You must keep your voice quiet. We are talking of the weather. Now!'

'I can't. I . . . I . . .'

'Be quiet child. Be quiet.' He put his long, cold face very near to his daughter's. He found himself horribly revolted by her. Her features were thick, her jaws heavy, her whole figure repellently powerful. 'Answer me,' he said. 'You were in the stable?'

'Yes.'

'One moment, though. Who knew you were in love with this wretched curate?'

'No one. I've never said a——'

'Don't worry,' said George. 'The whole god-damned village knows. They've been sniggering about it in the Plough for three years past.'

'Likely enough,' said Mr. Princey. 'Likely enough. What filth!' He made as if to wipe something off the backs of his hands. 'Well, now, we continue. You were in the stable?'

'Yes.'

'You were putting the croquet set into its box?'

'Yes.'

'You heard someone crossing the yard?'

'Yes.'

'It was Withers?'

'Yes.'

'So you called him?'

'Yes.'

'Loudly? Did you call him loudly? Could anyone have heard?'

'No, Father. I'm sure not. I didn't call him. He saw me as I went to the door. He just waved his hand and came over.'

'How *can* I find out from you whether there was anyone about? Whether he *could* have been seen?'

'I'm sure not, Father. I'm quite sure.'

'So you both went into the stable?'

'Yes. It was raining hard.'

'What did he say?'

'He said "Hullo Milly." And to excuse him coming in the back way, but he'd set out to walk over to Bass Hill.'

'Yes.'

'And he said, passing the park, he'd seen the house and suddenly thought of me, and he thought he'd just look in for a minute, just to tell me something. He said he was so happy, he wanted me to share it. He'd heard from the Bishop he was to have the vicarage. And it wasn't only that. It meant he could marry. And he began to stutter. And I thought he meant me.'

'Don't tell me what you thought. Exactly what he said. Nothing else.'

'Well . . . Oh dear!'

'Don't cry. It is a luxury you cannot afford. Tell me!'

'He said no. He said it wasn't me. It's Ella Brangwyn-Davies. And he was sorry. And all that. Then he went to go.'

'And then?'

'I went mad. He turned his back. I had the winning post of the croquet set in my hand——'

'Did you shout or scream? I mean, as you hit him?'

'No. I'm sure I didn't.'

'Did he? Come on! Tell me!'

'No, Father.'

'And then?'

'I threw it down. I came straight into the house. That's all. I wish I were dead!'

'And you met none of the servants. No one will go into the

stable. You see, George, he probably told people he was going to Bass Hill. Certainly no one knows he came here. He might have been attacked in the woods. We must consider every detail . . . A curate, with his head battered in——'

'Don't, Father!' cried Millicent.

'Do you want to be hanged? A curate with his head battered in, found in the woods. Who'd want to kill Withers?'

There was a tap on the door, which opened immediately. It was little Captain Smollett, who never stood on ceremony. 'Who'd kill Withers?' said he. 'I would with pleasure. How d'you do, Mrs. Princey. I walked right in.'

'He heard you, Father,' moaned Millicent.

'My dear, we can all have our little joke,' said her father. 'Don't pretend to be shocked. A little theoretical curate-killing, Smollett. In these days we talk nothing but thrillers.'

'Parsonicide,' said Captain Smollett. 'Justifiable parsonicide. Have you heard about Ella Brangwyn-Davies? I shall be laughed at.'

'Why?' said Mr. Princey. 'Why should you be laughed at?'

'Had a shot in that direction myself,' said Smollett, with careful sang-froid. 'She half said yes, too. Hadn't you heard? She told most people. Now it'll look as if I got turned down for a white rat in a dog collar.'

'Too bad!' said Mr. Princey.

'Fortune of war,' said the little captain.

'Sit down,' said Mr. Princey. 'Mother, Millicent, console Captain Smollett with your best light conversation. George and I have something to look to. We shall be back in a minute or two, Smollett. Come, George.'

It was actually five minutes before Mr. Princey and his son returned.

'Excuse me, my dear,' said Mr. Princey to his wife. 'Smollet, would you care to see something rather interesting? Come out to the stables for a moment.'

They went into the stable yard. The buildings were now unused except as odd sheds. No one ever went there. Captain Smollett entered, George followed him, Mr. Princey came last. As he closed the door he took up a gun which stood behind it. 'Smollett,' said he, 'we have come out to shoot a rat which George

heard squeaking under that tub. Now, you must listen to me very carefully or you will be shot by accident. I mean that.'

Smollett looked at him. 'Very well,' said he. 'Go on.'

'A very tragic happening has taken place this afternoon,' said Mr. Princey. 'It will be even more tragic unless it is smoothed over.'

'Oh?' said Smollett.

'You heard me ask,' said Mr. Princey, 'who would kill Withers. You heard Millicent make a comment, an unguarded comment.'

'Well?' said Smollett. 'What of it?'

'Very little,' said Mr. Princey. 'Unless you heard that Withers had met a violent end this very afternoon. And that, my dear Smollett, is what you are going to hear.'

'Have you killed him?' cried Smollett.

'Millicent has,' said Mr. Princey.

'Hell!' said Smollett.

'It *is* hell,' said Mr. Princey. 'You would have remembered—and guessed.'

'Maybe,' said Smollett. 'Yes. I suppose I should.'

'Therefore,' said Mr. Princey, 'you constitute a problem.'

'Why did she kill him?' said Smollett.

'It is one of these disgusting things,' said Mr. Princey. 'Pitiable, too. She deluded herself that he was in love with her.'

'Oh, of course,' said Smollett.

'And he told her about the Brangwyn-Davies girl.'

'I see,' said Smollett.

'I have no wish,' said Mr. Princey, 'that she should be proved either a lunatic or a murderess. I could hardly live here after that.'

'I suppose not,' said Smollett.

'On the other hand,' said Mr. Princey, '*you* know about it.'

'Yes,' said Smollett. 'I am wondering if I could keep my mouth shut. If I promised you——'

'I am wondering if I could believe you,' said Mr. Princey.

'If I promised,' said Smollett.

'If things went smoothly,' said Mr. Princey. 'But not if there was any sort of suspicion, any questioning. You would be afraid of being an accessory.'

'I don't know,' said Smollett.

'I do,' said Mr. Princey. 'What are we going to do?'

'I can't see anything else,' said Smollett. 'You'd never be fool enough to do me in. You can't get rid of two corpses.'

'I regard it,' said Mr. Princey, 'as a better risk than the other. It could be an accident. Or you and Withers could both disappear. There are possibilities in that.'

'Listen,' said Smollett. 'You can't——'

'Listen,' said Mr. Princey. 'There may be a way out. There *is* a way out, Smollett. You gave me the idea yourself.'

'Did I?' said Smollett. 'What?'

'You said you would kill Withers,' said Mr. Princey. 'You have a motive.'

'I was joking,' said Smollett.

'You are always joking,' said Mr. Princey. 'People think there must be something behind it. Listen, Smollett, I can't trust you; therefore you must trust me. Or I will kill you now, in the next minute. I mean that. You can choose between dying and living.'

'Go on,' said Smollett.

'There is a sewer here,' said Mr. Princey, speaking fast and forcefully. 'That is where I am going to put Withers. No outsider knows he has come up here this afternoon. No one will ever look there for him unless you tell them. You must give me evidence that you have murdered Withers.'

'Why?' said Smollett.

'So that I shall be dead sure that you will never open your lips on the matter,' said Mr. Princey.

'What evidence?' said Smollett.

'George,' said Mr. Princey, 'hit him in the face, hard.'

'Good God!' said Smollett.

'Again,' said Mr. Princey. 'Don't bruise your knuckles.'

'Oh!' said Smollett.

'I'm sorry,' said Mr. Princey. 'There must be traces of a struggle between you and Withers. Then it will not be altogether safe for you to go to the police.'

'Why won't you take my word?' said Smollett.

'I will when we've finished,' said Mr. Princey. 'George, get that croquet post. Take your handkerchief to it. As I told you, Smollett, you'll just grasp the end of this croquet post. I shall shoot you if you don't.'

'Oh, hell!' said Smollett. 'All right.'

'Pull two hairs out of his head, George,' said Mr. Princey, 'and remember what I told you to do with them. Now, Smollett, you take that bar and raise the big flagstone with the ring in it. Withers is in the next stall. You've got to drag him through and dump him in.'

'I won't touch him,' said Smollett.

'Stand back, George,' said Mr. Princey, raising his gun.

'Wait a minute,' cried Smollett. 'Wait a minute.' He did as he was told.

Mr. Princey wiped his brow. 'Look here,' said he. 'Everything is perfectly safe. Remember, no one knows that Withers came here. Everyone thinks he walked over to Bass Hill. That's five miles of country to search. They'll never look in our sewer. Do you see how safe it is?'

'I suppose it is,' said Smollett.

'Now come into the house,' said Mr. Princey. 'We shall never get that rat.'

They went into the house. The maid was bringing tea into the drawing-room. 'See, my dear,' said Mr. Princey to his wife, 'we went into the stable to shoot a rat and we found Captain Smollett. Don't be offended, my dear fellow.'

'You must have walked up the back drive,' said Mrs. Princey.

'Yes. Yes. That was it,' said Smollett in some confusion.

'You've cut your lip,' said George, handing him a cup of tea.

'I . . . I just knocked it.'

'Shall I tell Bridget to bring some iodine?' said Mrs. Princey. The maid looked up, waiting.

'Don't trouble, please,' said Smollett. 'It's nothing.'

'Very well, Bridget,' said Mrs. Princey. 'That's all.'

'Smollett is very kind,' said Mr. Princey. 'He knows all our trouble. We can rely on him. We have his word.'

'Oh, have we, Captain Smollett?' cried Mrs. Princey. 'You *are* good.'

'Don't worry, old fellow,' Mr. Princey said. 'They'll never find anything.'

Pretty soon Smollett took his leave. Mrs. Princey pressed his hand very hard. Tears came into her eyes. All three of them watched him go down the drive. Then Mr. Princey spoke very earnestly to his wife for a few minutes and the two of them

went upstairs and spoke still more earnestly to Millicent. Soon after, the rain having ceased, Mr. Princey took a stroll round the stable yard.

He came back and went to the telephone. 'Put me through to Bass Hill police station,' said he. 'Quickly . . . Hullo, is that the police station? This is Mr. Princey, of Abbott's Laxton. I'm afraid something rather terrible has happened up here. Can you send someone at once?'

Season of Mists

I was ready for anything when I came to the town of T——. It was already late in the year. Dead leaves crawled like crabs over the asphalt of the deserted esplanade. Winds raced along the corridors of the larger hotels, barging into the wrong rooms.

It is at such a place, and at such a season, that one finds the desperate grass widow, or young things whose natural credulity snaps starvingly at the grossest counterfeit. The illusion of teeming possibilities has gone with the licentious carnival of summer, the masks of coarse sunburn, and he who may be sitting alone among the sand dunes. Ravenous dreams pace the unvisited sitting-rooms of villas, or stalk between rising waves and falling leaves.

The concealed smile in my smile, and the concealed meaning in my words, would have made me seem a sort of scheme-riddled Machiavelli in the ephemeral mating dance of July. I should have been condemned as heavy going, would-be clever, even unpleasant or dangerous. Now, on the other hand, my slightly involved personality would be as welcome as a jig-saw puzzle in hands already fidgety with boredom. Nevertheless, I had gone so far as to purchase a ready-made sports jacket, and if my black moustache had had any objective existence I should have taken the precaution of shaving it off.

I still had a little money. I was not after profit, but pleasure. I desired to intoxicate myself on a real emotion, and I wondered in which of the still occupied villas, in what sort of absurd drawing-room, treading softly in fear of what husband or what aunt, I should perform what drunken antics my chosen potion would inspire in me.

Meticulous in my observance of protective mimicry, I could not of course omit the *snorter* or *quick one* before dinner on my first evening in the hotel. I entered the bar in jaunty style, my mouth already writhing with a classy catch-phrase, like the eye

socket of a provincial actor (but all actors are provincial) in travail with its waggish monocle.

This witticism was never uttered. I thought I saw a golden fish. It was the honey head of the barmaid, bent over a love story, but as the place had the appearance of the tourist cocktail lounge of a liner sunk two years previously in a hundred fathoms of grey-green ocean, I thought it was a golden fish. I was sharply corrected when she raised a face so dappled with flush and sun-gleam that I looked instinctively for the orchard boughs above her head.

All this was disconcerting, and effective in shattering my pose. It happens that these fresh and almost eatable faces have a peculiar effect on me. 'Farewell before hail,' I thought, 'to the sailor's languishing wife, and to the ardent anaemia at the Vicarage! I am off.'

I ordered one of the far inferior intoxicants that stood ranked behind her, and retired a pace, and took a stepdown, changing my name to Bert, a young fellow already doing well, at once cheeky and shy, but probably capable of being serious. One never knew what I could come out with next.

I was wondering about that myself when I saw that she, affecting to take no particular notice of me, had retired into the flowery thicket of her reverie. I realized that this must have grown very wild and tangly in the last month or two, because, before she could turn and peep out from it, it swallowed her up entirely, like a prospective sleeping beauty, and, indeed, she yawned.

I analysed this yawn with the aloof precision of one of those scientists who are always helping Scotland Yard. I discovered it to be heavy with a super-saturation of sigh, its origin a plaintive protest against the difference between dreams and reality. Though this was only the middle of November, I diagnosed it as a premature December yawn, *and in December they settle for reality*. This emboldened me to act at once.

Affecting to consult my heart, exactly as if it had been a pocket watch, I gasped, bit my lip, and stared at her in wild surmise. You could never tell when I was joking. 'Do you believe,' I said fervently, 'in love at first sight?'

'No, sir,' she said severely. 'That sort of thing doesn't appeal, thank you.'

It was clear she had not been a barmaid more than seven or eight weeks. From behind her professional hauteur she peeped out to watch for its effect, as bewitchingly as if she were a child wearing her mother's terrible hat.

'I'm not fooling,' I said (taken down a peg or two, you understand). 'The fact is, believe it or not, I'm a bit psychic.' On this word, the most useful though not the most beautiful in our language, she raised her eyes to mine, which I had baited with pieces of an old sincerity which I carry about for just such purposes. I put a little in my voice too, as I added, 'Do you know what I thought, the minute I saw you?'

'What?' said she.

'I'll tell you,' said I. ' "That girl's tragic," I thought. "She's being wasted. There's a sort of bar between her and all sorts of delightful surprises. I wish it could be melted away." '

'Not really!'

'I did,' said I. 'Give me your hand. I can read it like a book, probably by your favourite author. Oh, I'm psychic all right. I had a sort of premonition when I came here. I knew I was going to fall desperately in love.'

'I know you're kidding,' said she, but she offered me her open hand, which proved to be quite illegible.

Nevertheless I spoke with confidence. 'You've been thinking of love today. You've been dreaming of a stranger. Now don't deny it, because it's written in your hand. And that's not all.'

'What else does it say?' said she.

'Call it Fate,' said I solemnly. 'Call it Kismet if you like; I can deny you nothing, Or, look here, let's call it Destiny. You can't go back on Destiny, you know. It would absolutely ruin it. It says . . . Guess what!'

'I can't,' she said. 'Do tell me.'

I couldn't guess either. Dumbly I scrutinized her palm. She leaned a little farther over the bar, joining me in the study. Our foreheads touched. I remained conscious, but the shock had dislocated all connection between awareness and volition. With a divine shudder I heard myself reply, 'It says we are going to be married.'

'Oh,' said she. 'I don't know about that.'

'What?' I cried, hurt to the quick, all caution forgotten. 'Is

this mutual understanding? Is this two hearts beating as one? Don't let's start off with a rift like this between us.'

'I didn't mean it that way,' she replied remorsefully.

'Splendid,' I said. 'Our first little quarrel healed already. And don't we sort of know one another better for it? Aren't we somehow closer? If not, we ought to be. Lean over a little farther.'

Fate had evidently triumphed. Her kiss was like cowslips and cream. I was unquestionably in love, and felt no longer responsible for my actions.

At that moment, however, a gong sounded in the echoing depths of the hotel. 'Better go,' she said, already wifely. 'Go and get your dinner. I'll be here later on.'

I bowed before the importance of Bert's dinner, and went. When I returned the bar was still empty of intruders, and she was still there. I rushed forward, I flung my arms about her, and resumed the kiss that had been so coarsely interrupted.

I had just been struck by the nice thought that perhaps after all it tasted of cream and honeysuckle, rather than cowslips, when I was also struck by a tremendous blow in the face.

'What?' I said, staggering back. 'Are you tired of me already? You might at least have broken it more gently.'

'I'll call the manager,' said she.

'Do so,' said I. 'Call the Boots, too! Call the waiters! Call all the principal residents of T—— on Sea! Let them hear how you promised to marry me before dinner, and socked me in the puss for a kiss immediately afterwards!'

'Promised to marry you?' she cried. 'Before dinner? Oooh! It must have been Bella. Fancy! Bella!'

'What is your name?' said I.

'Nellie,' said she.

'That's who it was,' said I. 'Nellie. You. To the devil with this interfering, designing Bella, who—' But, as I spoke, she turned and darted through the door behind her.

I heard some delicious squeals and giggles. 'I hope,' I thought, 'she is giving that abominable Bella a good pinch. Pretending to be her! She had the poor girl all confused.' At that moment the door opened again, and out they came, hand in hand.

'I'm Nellie.'

'I'm Bella.'

'Keep quite still,' said I, clowning astonishment. 'I must think for a little while about this.'

'Look! He's all bowled over.'

'Isn't he sweet?'

'Yes, he's a duck. Bella, you *are* lucky.'

'Your turn next.'

That was the rub. My mind darkened at the thought of a brother-in-law. You know what beasts men are. A thousand intricate jealousies tangled themselves before me. The girls were so exactly alike; they *went together*, as we say. Besides, who can choose between cowslips and honeysuckle?

It was time I said something. 'Well!' said I. 'By all that's wonderful! I wish old Fred were here tonight!'

'Who's Fred?'

'Fred? You'll like Fred. He's a splendid fellow. We're twins.'

'No!'

'Yes, identical twins. More alike than you are. Same looks. Same tastes. Same thoughts. I always know what he's thinking. Listen! He's sort of trying to get through to me now. I bet he knows I'm happy. He does. He's sending congratulations. In waves. He's asking something. What is it Fred, old boy? Is there what? Oh, *Is there one for me, Bert? That's* what he's trying to say. What shall I tell him, Nellie?'

'Don't know, I'm sure.'

'Why don't you bring him along one day?' said Bella.

'I can't, said I. 'We're on a very special job. It's just half the time off for each of us. But I'll tell you what; I'll *send* him along.'

This was agreed upon. I spent the rest of the evening delightfully, and in the morning bought a new sports coat, brushed my hair differently, and returned as Fred.

I entered the bar peering through my fingers. 'Which are you?' I cried. 'I don't want to look at you properly till I know. I might fall in love with the wrong one.'

'I'm Nellie.'

'Good! To make it absolutely perfect, I'm Fred.' With that I dropped my hand. 'Good old Bert!' I cried. 'Wonderful taste he's got! Wonderful fellow!'

'He's nice. But you're nice, too.'

'Do you really think so?'

In short, we were happy. Soon afterwards Bella came in. There was nothing but giggles, comparisons, talk of future joys.

'It really ought to be a double wedding,' they said.

'Can't be done,' I replied. 'Truly. Ask Bert if you don't believe me. He'll tell you it's out of the question.'

The next few days passed like lightning. All went twice as merrily as the ordinary marriage bell. I rented two bungalows, semi-detached, furnished them from the same store, took a week off for my honeymoon as Bert, and the next week for my honeymoon as Fred.

I then settled down to lives of singular contentment and regularity. One evening Nellie and I would have Bella to dinner, and spend the time saying what a grand fellow Bert was, and the next evening Bella and I would entertain Nellie and do the same for Fred.

It was a full month before I asked myself, which is the happier of the two, Fred or Bert? I was unable to answer. The doubt persisted until it tortured me.

I became a little moody, and sometimes would retire to the next room, under the pretence of a headache, in order to ponder the question over again. On one of these occasions, I went into the hallway to get cigarettes from my overcoat and I heard the girls' voices through the flimsy door of the drawing-room. 'The darlings!' I thought. 'They are discussing their husbands again. This may shed some light on my problem. Bella thinks Bert has the nicer voice. Nellie claims that Fred knows more songs. What is this? Really, Bella! Come, come, Nellie, you flatter me! Bella, what an exaggeration! Nellie, that is a downright lie!'

Soon afterwards I heard Nellie go home. I rejoined Bella, who was obviously much exercised in her mind. 'Bert,' she said, 'who is the best swimmer, you or Fred?'

'We never compete, darling, we are so sure we are equal.'

'I wonder if you would be if you tried,' said Bella, still looking extremely thoughtful.

When I returned to the other bungalow next evening, I found Nellie equally ill at ease. 'Tell me something,' said she. 'Of course I know Bella's my sister, my twin. Nobody could love her more

than I do. But tell me, Fred, would you say she was absolutely truthful?'

'Absolutely,' said I. 'I'd stake my life on it. Bert's life, too. She is incapable of a lie.'

'Oh!' said Nellie, lapsing into a deeper reverie than before.

It was with a sardonic pleasure that I watched the increasing wistfulness of both my wives. 'I have an idea,' said I to myself, 'that I shall soon learn whether Bert or Fred is the happier.'

Sure enough, it was not long before Nellie sent round one evening to ask if Bert would help her move some heavy furniture. I went to her aid, and afterwards we sat talking for a while on twins, likenesses, differences, marriage, conventions, love, and what would have happened if Fred had met Bella before I had, and whether what hurts nobody can really be said to be wrong.

It took a long time to resolve all these problems to our complete satisfaction, and I was deprived of a good deal of Bella's company that evening. But this was made up to me on the following day, for she came round to ask if Fred would help her with a leaky tap, and we had an almost identical discussion which took just as long for its complete resolution.

I was now in a state of extreme and complicated bliss. It was clear that Bert had no reason to envy Fred, and that Fred's happiness was in all respects equal to Bert's. Not only had I two charming wives, but my double domestic happiness was multiplied by a dual and delicious infidelity.

But I was one day in the character of Bert, sitting before the fire enjoying the more legal of my happinesses with Bella, charmed by her prattle and pleased by the complete restoration of her good spirits, when suddenly I was struck, as if by a thunderbolt, by the thought: 'This woman is deceiving me!'

I leapt up with a muttered excuse, and rushed out of the now hateful house. I walked on the shore till late that night, a prey to the most bitter reflections. I had to admit that I was largely responsible, but I at least knew that it made no difference. She had no such excuse; it was she that had blighted our Eden.

I went home long after midnight, slept uneasily, and hurried off in the morning, eager to exchange the pitiful personality of the deceived husband for the roguish character of his betrayer.

As Fred, I returned with a jaunty sneer. Nellie greeted me. 'How was Bert,' said she, 'when you left him?'

'Bert?' said I. 'Bert?'

Without another word I went heavily upstairs, and looked at myself in the mirror. The sight maddened me. I itched to get my fingers round my throat. I longed to rush next door and pour out my troubles to my adorable mistress, but I knew in my heart that she was as false as her sister below.

I thought of divorce, working out the actions and counter-actions on my fingers, and badly spraining two of them in the process. Besides, there was the unsavoury publicity.

At last I made up my mind. I hurried off to catch the last bus to the town. Arrived there, I wrote two notes, as follows:

'Dear Nellie, I have found you out. I am asking Bert to come for a swim. He will never return. Fred.'

'Dear Bella, I know all. Am persuading Fred to take a midnight bathe. He will not come back. Bert.'

Having posted my letters, I took my two sports coats to the beach, where I left them side by side.

There was just time to get the train for B——, and it was there that I met Mrs. Wilkinson.

Over Insurance

ALICE and Irwin were as simple and as happy as any young couple in a family-style motion picture. In fact, they were even happier, for people were not looking at them all the time and their joys were not restricted by the censorship code. It is therefore impossible to describe the transports with which Alice flew to embrace Irwin on his return from work, or the rapture with which Irwin returned her caresses.

It was at least two hours before they even thought about dinner. Even then, it took a long time to get the food on the table, there was so much patting and petting, nibbling at the nape of the neck, mumbling of ears, kissing, fondling, and foolishness to the carrying of every single dish.

When at last, the meal was ready, you may be sure they ate with excellent appetite. Nevertheless, whatever was best on his plate, he found time to put it on hers, and she was no slower in picking out some dainty titbit to pop between his eager and rather rubbery lips.

After dinner they would sit in one chair, for all the world like two innocent love-birds in a cage, and he would entertain her with a detailed catalogue of her charms, which gave her the highest possible opinion of his taste and judgement. However, these delights did not endure very long, for they found it necessary to go to bed at an early hour, in order to rise bright and fresh in the morning.

It was a dull and heavy night when he did not wake up once or twice, and switch on the light to assure himself she was not merely a delightful dream. She, blinking through the rosy radiance, was not in the least annoyed at being thus awakened, and they would have a very delightful little conversation and soon would fall happily asleep again.

It is not likely that a husband whose evenings are so contentedly spent at home will often linger in saloons and bar-rooms when the day's work is done. It was only on rare occasions that

Irwin suffered himself to be persuaded, and even then he would suddenly think of his darling; how plump, how soft, how deliciously rounded she was, and he would give a sort of frisk or leap into the air.

'Why the hell do you do that?' his friends would demand. 'Did you think someone was giving you a hotfoot or something?'

'No, no,' he would reply evasively. 'I was just feeling peppy. I was just feeling full of beans.'

With that, he would grin all over his face like a fool, and take hasty leave of them, and rush home at top speed, eager to reassure himself as to the genuine existence, and his own miraculous possession, of those tender, those rounded, those infinitely sweet details that made up his delectable little wife.

On one of these occasions he was darting home as fast as his legs would carry him, when he forgot to look about him in crossing the street, and a taxi came swiftly around the corner. Fortunately the driver jammed on his brakes; otherwise Irwin would have been bowled over like a ninepin, and might never have seen his honey bun any more. This idea appalled him, and he was unable to dismiss it from his mind.

That night they were seated as usual in their single chair, she tenderly stroking his somewhat sallow chops, and he protruding his lips, like some eager ape at the approach of a milk bottle, in the attempt to imprint kisses on her passing hand. In this interval it was his custom to recite all the events of the long day, and especially how he had missed her. 'And that reminds me,' said he, 'I was very narrowly missed myself, by a taxi, as I was crossing the street, and if the driver had not put his brakes on I should have been bowled over like a ninepin. And then maybe I should never have seen my honey bun any more.'

At these words her lips trembled, and her eyes brimmed over with tears. 'If *you* didn't see me any more,' she said, 'then I wouldn't see *you* any more.'

'I was just thinking of that,' said Irwin.

'We always have the same thoughts,' said she.

This, however, was no consolation; their thoughts that evening were so utterably sad. 'All day tomorrow,' said Alice, weeping, 'I shall be seeing you lying all squashed in the gutter. I'm sure it will be too much for me. I shall just lie down and die.'

'Oh, I wish you had not said that,' said Irwin. 'Now I shall be thinking of you lying all crumpled on the hearth-rug. I shall go mad, or die.'

'Oh, no!' cried Alice. 'Now I shall think of you dying because you think I might be dead. The thought will kill me.'

'Now it's even worse,' lamented Irwin. 'Supposing you should die because you think that I've died because. . . . It's too much! I can't bear it!'

'Nor can I,' said she.

They hugged each other very tightly, and exchanged kisses rendered surpassingly salty by their tears. This is thought by some to add relish, as with peanuts, by bringing out the sweetness. Irwin and Alice were too overcome to appreciate fine points of this nature; they could think of nothing but of how each would feel if the other should suddenly die. Consequently they got never a wink of sleep all night long, and Irwin was deprived of the pleasure of dreaming of his Alice, and of switching on the light to find that she was true. She, on her side, was denied the joy of blinking up in a sudden rosy radiance to see him hovering and goggling over her. They made up for this by the passion and fervour of their embraces. Consequently, when the dawn came cool and grey and rational in at their window, the unhappy pair were themselves feeling cooler, greyer, and more rational than at any time since they had first met.

'Alice,' said Irwin, 'we must look at this bravely. We must face up to what may happen, and do our best to provide ourselves with what consolation we can.'

'My only consolation will be to cry,' said she.

'Yes, and mine, too,' said he. 'But would you rather cry in a fireless garret, and have to stop and get up and do your own housework, or would you rather cry in a fine apartment, with a mink coat on, and plenty of servants to bring in your meals?'

'I would rather have my meals brought in,' said she. 'Because then I could go right on crying. And if I had a mink coat on I should not catch cold, and sneeze in the middle of it.'

'And I would rather cry on a yacht,' said he, 'where my tears could be ascribed to the salt spray, and I should not be thought unmanly. Let us insure each other, darling, so that if the worst

happens we can cry without interruption. Let us put nine-tenths of our money into insurance.'

'It will leave us very little to live on now,' said she. 'But that is all the better, beloved, because then it will be all the more a consolation.'

'That was exactly my idea,' said he. 'We always have the same thoughts. This very day I will take out the policies.'

'And let us,' cried she, 'insure our dear bird also,' pointing to the feathered cageling, whom they always left uncovered at night, in order that his impassioned trills might grace their diviner raptures.

'You are right,' said he. 'I will put ten bucks on the bird. His chirpings would be as a string of pearls to me, if ever I were to be left alone.'

That day Irwin made arrangements for the investment of nine-tenths of his earnings. 'We are poor,' said he, on his return, 'but we have each other. If ever we are robbed of that joy we shall at least have many thousands of dollars.'

'Do not speak of them,' said she. 'Hateful dollars!'

'By all means,' said he. 'Let us have dinner. I was very economical at lunchtime, and I am unusually hungry this evening.'

'It will not take long,' said she. 'I was economical at the market, and have bought a new sort of food. It is amazingly cheap, and it contains a whole alphabet of vitamins, enough to keep a whole family in pep and energy for a week. It says so in the description on the packet.'

'Splendid!' said he. 'Your dear, sweet, tender little metabolism, and my great, gruff, bearish metabolism, will spell all the honey-dovey-love-words in creation out of that same alphabet of vitamins.'

No prospect could be more agreeable, but as the days passed it appeared that their metabolism would have put up a poor show at any word-making game. Or perhaps the manufacturer of the product had been misled by some alien-minded scientist, and had thus erred slightly in the description on the packet. Irwin grew so weak that he could no longer leap into the air at the thought of his darling, his tender, his deliciously rounded little wife. On the other hand, Alice grew so thin that he no longer had any reason to do so.

Her stockings now wrinkled revoltingly upon her stick-like legs.

'I think,' thought Irwin, 'she no longer rushes to greet me with eager rapture as of yore. Perhaps it's as well. How much more delightful, to be greeted by a porterhouse steak!'

What with this new, disturbing thought, and his sawdust diet, and the innumerable financial worries that increasingly beset the young lovers, now that nine-tenths of their income went into insurance, Irwin frequently passed wakeful nights, but he no longer felt impelled to switch on the light, and feast his eyes on his beloved. The last time he had done so, she had mistaken his face for an omelette. 'Oh, it's only you!' she had murmured, turning crossly away.

They fed their new diet to the bird, who soon afterwards flopped on his back, threw up his feet, and died. 'At least we get fifty bucks on him,' said Irwin. 'And he is only a bird!'

'I hope we are not thinking the same thought,' said Alice.

'Of course not,' said he. 'How can you imagine it?'

'*I* certainly am not,' said she. 'How shall we spend the money? Shall we buy another canary?'

'No,' said he. 'Let us have something bigger. Let us buy a big, fat roasting chicken.'

'So we will,' said she, 'and potatoes and mushrooms, and string beans, and chocolate cake, and cream, and coffee.'

'Yes,' said he. 'And coffee. Get some good, strong, bitter coffee; something with a real kick to it, if you know what I mean.'

'I will get,' said she, 'the best, the strongest, and the bitterest I can.'

That night they were not long in carrying in the dishes, nor in emptying them when they were on the table.

'This is certainly good strong coffee,' said Irwin. 'And bitter.'

'Is it not?' said she. 'You didn't, by any chance, change the cups round while I was in the kitchen?'

'No, dear,' said Irwin. 'I was just wondering if you had. It certainly seems to have a kick in it.'

'Oh, Irwin!' cried Alice. 'Is it possible we had the same thought after all?'

'It feels like it,' cried Irwin, legging it for the door faster even than he had done in the old days, when he used to leave saloons

and bar-rooms with such impetuous speed. 'I must get to a doctor.'

'So must I,' said she, fumbling also for the latch.

The poison, however, acted extremely quickly on their weakened constitutions. Even as they scuffled for precedence they fell prone upon the door mat, and the postman came and covered them with bills.

De Mortuis

DR. RANKIN was a large and rawboned man on whom the newest suit at once appeared outdated, like a suit in a photograph of twenty years ago. This was due to the squareness and flatness of his torso, which might have been put together by a manufacturer of packing cases. His face also had a wooden and a roughly constructed look; his hair was wiglike and resentful of the comb. He had those huge and clumsy hands which can be an asset to a doctor in a small upstate town where people still retain a rural relish for paradox, thinking that the more apelike the paw, the more precise it can be in the delicate business of a tonsillectomy.

This conclusion was perfectly justified in the case of Dr. Rankin. For example, on this particular fine morning, though his task was nothing more ticklish than the cementing over of a large patch on his cellar floor, he managed those large and clumsy hands with all the unflurried certainty of one who would never leave a sponge within or create an unsightly scar without.

The Doctor surveyed his handiwork from all angles. He added a touch here and a touch there till he had achieved a smoothness altogether professional. He swept up a few last crumbs of soil and dropped them into the furnace. He paused before putting away the pick and shovel he had been using, and found occasion for yet another artistic sweep of his trowel, which made the new surface precisely flush with the surrounding floor. At this moment of supreme concentration the porch door upstairs slammed with the report of a minor piece of artillery, which, appropriately enough, caused Dr. Rankin to jump as if he had been shot.

The Doctor lifted a frowning face and an attentive ear. He heard two pairs of heavy feet clump across the reasonant floor of the porch. He heard the house door opened and the visitors enter the hall, with which his cellar communicated by

a short flight of steps. He heard whistling and then the voices of Buck and Bud crying, 'Doc! Hi, Doc! They're biting!'

Whether the Doctor was not inclined for fishing that day, or whether, like others of his large and heavy type, he experienced an especially sharp, unsociable reaction on being suddenly startled, or whether he was merely anxious to finish undisturbed the job in hand and proceed to more important duties, he did not respond immediately to the inviting outcry of his friends. Instead, he listened while it ran its natural course, dying down at last into a puzzled and fretful dialogue.

'I guess he's out.'

'I'll write a note—say we're at the creek, to come on down.'

'We could tell Irene.'

'But she's not here, either. You'd think *she'd* be around.'

'Ought to be, by the look of the place.'

'You said it, Bud. Just look at this table. You could write your name——'

'Sh-h-h! Look!'

Evidently the last speaker had noticed that the cellar door was ajar and that a light was shining below. Next moment the door was pushed wide open and Bud and Buck looked down.

'Why, Doc! There you are!'

'Didn't you hear us yelling?'

The Doctor, not too pleased at what he had overheard, nevertheless smiled his rather wooden smile as his two friends made their way down the steps. 'I thought I heard someone,' he said.

'We were bawling our heads off,' Buck said. 'Thought nobody was home. Where's Irene?'

'Visiting,' said the Doctor. 'She's gone visiting.'

'Hey, what goes on?' said Bud. 'What are you doing? Burying one of your patients, or what?'

'Oh, there's been water seeping up through the floor,' said the Doctor. 'I figured it might be some spring opened up or something.'

'You don't say!' said Bud, assuming instantly the high ethical standpoint of the realtor. 'Gee, Doc, I sold you this property. Don't say I fixed you up with a dump where there's an underground spring.'

'There was water,' said the Doctor.

'Yes, but, Doc, you can look on that geological map the Kiwanis Club got up. There's not a better section of subsoil in the town.'

'Looks like he sold you a pup,' said Buck, grinning.

'No,' said Bud. 'Look. When the Doc came here he was green. You'll admit he was green. The things he didn't know!'

'He bought Ted Webber's jalopy,' said Buck.

'He'd have bought the Jessop place if I'd let him,' said Bud. 'But I wouldn't give him a bum steer.'

'Not the poor, simple city slicker from Poughkeepsie,' said Buck.

'Some people would have taken him,' said Bud. 'Maybe some people did. Not me. I recommended this property. He and Irene moved straight in as soon as they were married. I wouldn't have put the Doc on to a dump where there'd be a spring under the foundations.'

'Oh, forget it,' said the Doctor, embarrassed by this conscientiousness. 'I guess it was just the heavy rains.'

'By gosh!' Buck said, glancing at the besmeared point of the pickaxe. 'You certainly went deep enough. Right down into the clay, huh?'

'That's four feet down, the clay,' Bud said.

'Eighteen inches,' said the Doctor.

'Four feet,' said Bud. 'I can show you on the map.'

'Come on! No arguments,' said Buck. 'How's about it, Doc? An hour or two at the creek, eh? They're biting.'

'Can't do it, boys,' said the Doctor. 'I've got to see a patient or two.'

'Aw, live and let live, Doc,' Bud said. 'Give 'em a chance to get better. Are you going to depopulate the whole darn town?'

The Doctor looked down, smiled, and muttered, as he always did when this particular jest was trotted out. 'Sorry, boys,' he said. 'I can't make it.'

'Well,' said Bud, disappointed, 'I suppose we'd better get along. How's Irene?'

'Irene?' said the Doctor. 'Never better. She's gone visiting. Albany. Got the eleven o'clock train.'

'Eleven o'clock?' said Buck. 'For Albany?'

'Did I say Albany?' said the Doctor. 'Watertown, I meant.'

'Friends in Watertown?' Buck asked.

'Mrs. Slater,' said the Doctor. 'Mr. and Mrs. Slater. Lived next door to 'em when she was a kid, Irene said, over on Sycamore Street.'

'Slater?' said Bud. 'Next door to Irene. Not in *this* town.'

'Oh, yes,' said the Doctor. 'She was telling me all about them last night. She got a letter. Seems this Mrs. Slater looked after her when her mother was in the hospital one time.'

'No,' said Bud.

'That's what she told me,' said the Doctor. 'Of course, it was a good many years ago.'

'Look, Doc,' said Buck. 'Bud and I were raised in this town. We've known Irene's folk all our lives. We were in and out of their house all the time. There was never anybody next door called Slater.'

'Perhaps,' said the Doctor, 'she married again, this woman. Perhaps it was a different name.'

Bud shook his head.

'What time did Irene go to the station?' Buck asked.

'Oh, about a quarter of an hour ago,' said the Doctor.

'You didn't drive her?' said Buck.

'She walked,' said the Doctor.

'We came down Main Street,' Buck said. 'We didn't meet her.'

'Maybe she walked across the pasture,' said the Doctor.

'That's a tough walk with a suitcase,' said Buck.

'She just had a couple of things in a little bag, said the Doctor.

Bud was still shaking his head.

Buck looked at Bud, and then at the pick, at the new, damp cement on the floor. 'Jesus Christ!' he said.

'Oh, God, Doc!' Bud said. 'A guy like you!'

'What in the name of heaven are you two bloody fools thinking?' asked the Doctor. 'What are you trying to say?'

'A spring!' said Bud. 'I ought to have known right away it wasn't any spring.'

The Doctor looked at his cement-work, at the pick, at the large worried faces of his two friends. His own face turned livid. 'Am I crazy?' he said. 'Or are you? You suggest that I've—that Irene —my wife—oh, go on! Get out! Yes, go and get the sheriff. Tell him to come here and start digging. You—get out!'

Bud and Buck looked at each other, shifted their feet, and stood still again.

'Go on,' said the Doctor.

'I don't know,' said Bud.

'It's not as if he didn't have the provocation,' Buck said.

'God knows,' Bud said.

'God knows,' Buck said. 'You know. I know. The whole town knows. But try telling it to a jury.'

The Doctor put his hand to his head. 'What's that?' he said. 'What is it? Now what are you saying? What do you mean?'

'If this ain't being on the spot!' said Buck. 'Doc, you can see how it is. It takes some thinking. We've been friends right from the start. Damn good friends.'

'But we've got to think,' said Bud. 'It's serious. Provocation or not, there's a law in the land. There's such a thing as being an accomplice.'

'You were talking about provocation,' said the Doctor.

'You're right,' said Buck. 'And you're our friend. And if ever it could be called justifiable——'

'We've got to fix this somehow,' said Bud.

'Justified?' said the Doctor.

'You were bound to get wised up sooner or later,' said Buck.

'We could have told you,' said Bud. 'Only—what the hell?'

'We could,' said Buck. 'And we nearly did. Five years ago. Before ever you married her. You hadn't been here six months, but we sort of cottoned to you. Thought of giving you a hint. Spoke about it. Remember, Bud?'

Bud nodded. 'Funny,' he said. 'I came right out in the open about that Jessop property. I wouldn't let you buy that, Doc. But getting married, that's something else again. We could have told you.'

'We're that much responsible,' Buck said.

'I'm fifty,' said the Doctor. 'I suppose it's pretty old for Irene.'

'If you were Johnny Weissmuller at the age of twenty-one, it wouldn't make any difference,' said Buck.

'I know a lot of people think she's not exactly a perfect wife,' said the Doctor. 'Maybe she's not. She's young. She's full of life.'

'Oh, skip it!' said Buck sharply, looking at the raw cement. 'Skip it, Doc, for God's sake.'

The Doctor brushed his hand across his face. 'Not everybody wants the same thing,' he said. 'I'm a sort of dry fellow. I don't open up very easily. Irene—you'd call her gay.'

'You said it,' said Buck.

'She's no housekeeper,' said the Doctor. 'I know it. But that's not the only thing a man wants. She's enjoyed herself.'

'Yeah,' said Buck. 'She did.'

'That's what I love,' said the Doctor. 'Because I'm not that way myself. She's not very deep, mentally. All right. Say she's stupid. I don't care. Lazy. No system. Well. I've got plenty of system. She's enjoyed herself. It's beautiful. It's innocent. Like a child.'

'Yes. If that was all,' Buck said.

'But,' said the Doctor, turning his eyes full on him, 'you seem to know there was more.'

'Everybody knows it,' said Buck.

'A decent, straightforward guy comes to a place like this and marries the town floozy,' Bud said bitterly. 'And nobody'll tell him. Everybody just watches.'

'And laughs,' said Buck. 'You and me, Bud, as well as the rest.'

'We told her to watch her step,' said Bud. 'We warned her.'

'Everybody warned her,' said Buck. 'But people get fed up. When it got to truck-drivers——'

'It was never us, Doc,' said Bud, earnestly. 'Not after you came along, anyway.'

'The town'll be on your side,' said Buck.

'That won't mean much when the case come to trial in the county seat,' said Bud.

'Oh!' cried the Doctor, suddenly. 'What shall I do? What shall I do?'

'It's up to you, Bud,' said Buck. 'I can't turn him in.'

'Take it easy, Doc,' said Bud. 'Calm down. Look, Buck. When we came in here the street was empty, wasn't it?'

'I guess so,' said Buck. 'Anyway, nobody saw us come down cellar.'

'And we haven't been down,' Bud said, addressing himself forcefully to the Doctor. 'Get that, Doc? We shouted upstairs, hung around a minute or two, and cleared out. But we never came down into this cellar.'

'I wish you hadn't,' the Doctor said heavily.

'All you have to do is say Irene went out for a walk and never came back,' said Buck. 'Bud and I can swear we saw her headed out of town with a fellow in a—well, say in a Buick sedan. Everybody'll believe that, all right. We'll fix it. But later. Now we'd better scram.'

'And remember, now. Stick to it. We never came down here and we haven't seen you today,' said Bud. 'So long!'

Buck and Bud ascended the steps, moving with a rather absurd degree of caution. 'You'd better get that . . . that thing covered up,' Buck said over his shoulder.

Left alone, the Doctor sat down on an empty box, holding his head with both hands. He was still sitting like this when the porch door slammed again. This time he did not start. He listened. The house door opened and closed. A voice cried, 'Yoo-hoo! Yoo-hoo! I'm back.'

The Doctor rose slowly to his feet. 'I'm down here, Irene!' he called.

The cellar door opened. A young woman stood at the head of the steps. 'Can you beat it?' she said. 'I missed the damn train.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'Did you come back across the field?'

'Yes, like a fool,' she said. 'I could have hitched a ride and caught the train up the line. Only I didn't think. If you'd run me over to the junction, I could still make it.'

'Maybe,' said the Doctor. 'Did you meet anyone coming back?'

'Not a soul,' she said. 'Aren't you finished with that old job yet?'

'I'm afraid I'll have to take it all up again,' said the Doctor. 'Come down here, my dear, and I'll show you.'

Ah, The University

JUST outside London there lived an old father who dearly loved his only son. Accordingly, when the boy was a youngster of some eighteen years, the old man sent for him and, with a benevolent glimmer of his horn-rimmed spectacles, said, 'Well, Jack, you are now done with school. No doubt you are looking forward to going to the university.'

'Yes, Dad, I am,' said the son.

'You show good judgement,' said the father. 'The best years of one's whole life are unquestionably those which are spent at the university. Apart from the vast honeycomb of learning, the mellow voices of the professors, the venerable grey buildings, and the atmosphere of culture and refinement, there is the delight of being in possession of a comfortable allowance.'

'Yes, Dad,' said the son.

'Rooms of one's own,' continued the father, 'little dinners to one's friends, endless credit with the tradespeople, pipes, cigars, claret, Burgundy, clothes.'

'Yes, Dad,' said the son.

'There are exclusive little clubs,' said the old man, 'all sorts of sports, May Weeks, theatricals, balls, parties, rags, binges, scaling of walls, dodging of proctors, fun of every conceivable description.'

'Yes! Yes, Dad!' cried the son.

'Certainly nothing in the world is more delightful than being at the university,' said the father. 'The springtime of life! Pleasure after pleasure! The world seems a whole dozen of oysters, each with a pearl in it. Ah, the university! However, I'm not going to send you there.'

'Then why the hell do you go on so about it?' said poor Jack.

'I did so in order that you might not think I was carelessly underestimating the pleasures I must call upon you to renounce.' said his father. 'You see, Jack, my health is not of the best; nothing but champagne agrees with me, and if I smoke a

second-rate cigar, I get a vile taste in my mouth. My expenses have mounted abominably and I shall have very little to leave to you, yet my dearest wish is to see you in a comfortable way of life.'

'If that is your wish, you might gratify it by sending me to the university,' said Jack.

'We must think of the future,' said his father. 'You will have your living to earn, and in a world where culture is the least marketable of assets. Unless you are to be a schoolmaster or a curate, you will gain no great advantage from the university.'

'Then what am I to be?' the young man asked.

'I read only a little while ago,' said his father, 'the following words, which flashed like sudden lightning upon the gloom in which I was considering your future: "Most players are weak." This is the superb opening sentence of a little brochure upon the delightful and universally popular game of poker. It is a game which is played for counters, commonly called chips, and each of these chips represents an agreeable sum of money.'

'Do you mean that I am to be a card-sharper?' cried the son.

'Nothing of the sort,' replied the old man promptly. 'I am asking you to be strong, Jack. I am asking you to show initiative, individuality. Why learn what everyone else is learning? You, my dear boy, shall be the first to study poker as systematically as others study languages, science, mathematics, and so forth—the first to tackle it as a student. I have set aside a cosy little room with chair, table, and some completely new packs of cards. A bookshelf contains several standard works on the game, and a portrait of Machiavelli hangs above the mantelpiece.'

The young man's protests were vain, so he set himself reluctantly to study. He worked hard, mastered the books, wore the spots off a hundred packs of cards, and at the end of the second year he set out into the world with his father's blessing and enough cash to sit in on a few games of penny ante.

After Jack left, the old man consoled himself with his glass of champagne and his first-rate cigar and those other little pleasures which are the solace of the old and the lonely. He was getting on very well with these when one day the telephone rang. It was an overseas call from Jack, whose existence the old man had all but forgotten.

'Hullo, Dad!' cried the son in tones of great excitement. 'I'm in Paris, sitting in on a game of poker with some Americans.'

'Good luck to you!' said the old man, preparing to hang up the receiver.

'Listen, Dad!' cried the son. 'It's like this. Well—just for once I'm playing without any limit.'

'Lord have mercy upon you!' said the old man piously.

'There's two of them still in,' said the son. 'They've raised me fifty thousand dollars and I've already put up every cent I've got.'

'I would rather,' groaned the old man, 'see a son of mine at the university than in such a situation.'

'But I've got four kings!' cried the young man.

'You can be sure the others have aces or straight flushes,' said the old man. 'Back down, my poor boy. Go out, and play for cigarette ends with the habitués of your doss house.'

'But listen, Dad!' cried the son. 'This is a stud round, and nothing wild. I've seen an ace chucked in. I've seen all the tens and fives chucked in. There isn't a straight flush possible.'

'Is that so?' cried the old man. 'Never let it be said I didn't stand behind my boy. Hold everything! I'm coming to your assistance.'

The son went back to the card table and begged his opponents to postpone matters until his father could arrive, and they, smiling at their cards, were only too willing to oblige him.

A couple of hours later the old man arrived by plane at Le Bourget, and shortly thereafter he was standing beside the card table, rubbing his hands, smiling, affable, the light glinting merrily upon his horn-rimmed spectacles. He shook hands with the Americans and noted their prosperous appearances. 'Now what have we here?' said he, sliding into his son's seat and fishing out his money.

'The bet,' said one of the opponents, 'stands at fifty thousand dollars. Seen by me. It's for you to see or raise.'

'Or run,' said the other.

'I trust my son's judgement,' said the old man. 'I shall raise fifty thousand dollars before I even glance at these cards in my hand.' With that he pushed forward a hundred thousand dollars of his own money.

'I'll raise that hundred thousand dollars,' said the first of his opponents.

'I'll stay and see,' said the other.

The old man looked at his cards. His face turned several colours in rapid succession. A low and quavering groan burst from his lips and he was seen to hesitate for a long time, showing all the signs of an appalling inward struggle. At last he summoned up his courage and, pushing out his last hundred thousand (which represented all the cigars, champagne, and other little pleasures he had to look forward to for the rest of his days), he licked his lips several times and said, 'I'll see you.'

'Four kings,' said the first opponent, laying down his hand.

'Hell!' said the second. 'Four queens.'

'And I,' moaned the old man, 'have four knaves.' With that he turned about and seized his son by the lapels of his jacket, shaking him like a terrier does a rat. 'Curse the day,' said he, 'that I ever became the father of an ignorant fool!'

'I swear I thought they were kings,' cried the young man.

'Don't you know that the "v" is for valets?' said his father.

'Good God!' the son said. 'I thought the "v" was something to do with French kings. You know, Charles V, Louis XV. Oh, what a pity I was never at the university!'

'Go,' said the old man. 'Go there, or go to Hell or wherever you wish. Never let me see or hear from you again.' And he stamped out of the room before his son or anyone else could say a word, even to tell him it was high-low stud they were playing and that the four knaves had won half the pot.

The young man, pocketing his share, mused that ignorance of every sort is deplorable, and, bidding his companions farewell, left Paris without further delay, and very soon he was entered at the university.

Three Bears Cottage

'OUR hen has laid two eggs,' said Mrs. Scrivener, 'and I have boiled them for breakfast.' As she spoke she unfolded a snowy napkin, and displayed the barnyard treasures, and she placed the white one in her husband's egg-cup, and the brown one in her own.

The Scriveners lived in a house with a steep roof and a white gable, set in a woodland tract, among juvenile birch trees. It was extremely small, but so was the rent, and they called it *Three Bears Cottage*. Their ménage was frugal, for Henry had retired at forty, in order to study Nature. Nevertheless, everything was as neat as a pin, and everything was carefully regarded. Each week, in their tiny garden, a new lettuce approached perfection. Its progress was minutely inspected from day to day, and, at that hour when it reached the crest and pinnacle of its development, they cut it, and ate it.

Another day, they had the cauliflower.

People who live thus, from one cherished detail to the next, invariably have complexions clear to the point of transparency, and bright and bird-like eyes. They are also keenly sensitive to the difference between one new-laid egg and another, which, like many other fine points, is often overlooked by the hurrying multitudes in cities. The Scriveners were both well aware that, contrary to a commercially fostered superstition, it is the brown egg that is superior in nourishment, in appearance, and in flavour. Mr. Scrivener noted that his wife had retained the brown egg, for herself, and his eyes grew rounder and more bird-like than before. 'Ella,' said he, 'I notice that you have given me the white egg, and retained the brown one for yourself.'

'Well,' said she, 'why not? Why should I not have the brown egg? It is I who keep everything neat and trim in the house, and polish the canary's cage, which you, if you were a man, would do for me. You do nothing but scratch about in the garden, and then go lounging about the woods, studying Nature.'

'Do not call Dickie "the canary" in that fashion,' responded her husband. 'I sometimes think you have no affection for any living creature about you, least of all for myself. After all, it is I who feed our dear hen every day, and, when she lays a brown egg, I think I should at least be *asked* if I would like it.'

'I think I know what the answer would be,' said his wife with a short laugh. 'No, Henry. I have not forgotten your conduct when the tomato ripened. I think the less said about who has what in this house, the better.'

Henry was unable to think of a fitting reply. He gazed moodily at the white egg, which seemed more than ever contemptible to him. His wife sawed off the top of her own egg with a grating and offensive sound. Henry took another look at his. 'By God,' thought he, 'it is not only white! It is smaller!'

This was altogether too much. 'Ella,' said Henry, 'you probably are uninterested in Ripley's *Believe It or Not*, for you despise the marvels of Nature. I am not sure he did not have a picture of a boiled egg, with an undigested worm coiled up inside it. I believe the egg was a brown one.'

'There is no worm in this egg,' replied Ella, munching away imperturbably. 'Look in your own. Very likely you will find one there.'

Henry, like an unskilled operator of a boomerang, was forcibly struck by the idea he had launched at Ella, in the hope of making her abandon her egg to him. He looked closely at his own egg, essayed a spoonful, and found he had no taste for it. 'Hell and damn it!' he muttered, for like many a mild man he was subject to fits of fury, in which he was by no means guarded as to his language.

His wife looked at him quietly, so that he was ashamed without being mollified. 'Selfishness and greed,' said he, 'have made the world what it is today.' Ella, with unconcealed relish, devoured a heaping spoonful. With tight lips and burning eyes, Henry rose from the table, reached for his cap, and stamped out of the house. Ella, with a lift of her eyebrows, took over his neglected egg, which she found not noticeably inferior in flavour to the first. This put her in an excellent humour, and it was with a whimsical rather than a gloating smile that she set about her household tasks.

Henry, on the other hand, slashed savagely at the tall weeds and grasses as he strode along the path to the woods. 'What a fool I was,' muttered he to himself,' to retire so early, believing that happiness is to be found in a cottage! I conceived a simplicity as pleasurable as a tale for children. Two cups, one adorned with roses, and the other with cornflowers. Two plates, one with a blue ring, and the other with a red ring. Two apples on the tree, both rosy, but one slightly larger than the other. *And that should be for me!* I am a man, and it is right that I should have the larger one. Yes, it could be a divine life, if Ella had only a sense of fitness of things. How happy I might be, if only she were less greedy, better tempered, not addicted to raking up old grudges, more affectionate, with slightly yellower hair, slimmer, and about twenty years younger! But what is the good of expecting such a woman to reform?'

He had just reached this point in his meditation when his eye fell upon a singularly handsome mushroom, of the genus *Clavaria,* and he uttered an exclamation of delight. It was part of their frugal economy at *Three Bears Cottage* to enliven their menus with all kinds of gleanings from the woods and fields, with wild berries and hedge salads, and above all with various sorts of edible fungi, which they found singularly palatable and nutritious.

Henry therefore gathered this one, and wrapped it in his handkerchief. His natural impulse was to make tracks for the cottage, and burst in radiant upon his mate (or perhaps enter lugubriously, holding his treasure trove behind his back for a surprise), but in any case sooner or later to come out with it exultingly, with, 'Here it is, my love, an admirable specimen of the genus *Clavaria!* Rake together your fire, my dear, and serve it up piping hot for lunch. You shall nibble a little, and I will nibble a little, and thus we shall have half each.' This generous urge was dashed by the thought that Ella was neither as good-tempered, nor as yellow-haired, nor as slim, nor as young as she ought to be. 'Besides,' thought he, 'she will certainly contrive to keep the better half for herself, and in any case, it is a mistake to cut a mushroom, for it allows the nutritious juices to escape.'

He looked about on all sides in the hope of finding another, but this was the only one. 'How eagerly I would take it home,' thought he, 'if I might be greeted by such a creature as I have often imagined! I would willingly sacrifice the juices. As it is, I had better toast it on a stick. It is a pity, for they tend to dry up that way.'

He began to hunt about for some twigs with which to make a little fire, and almost at once his eye fell upon another fungus, of singularly interesting shape, and of a pearly pallor that spoke volumes to the student of Nature. He recognized it at once as the Death Angel, that liberal scientists give a grosser name, calling it *Amanita phalloides*, if the ladies will pardon the Latin. It combines the liveliest of forms with the deadliest of material, and the smallest morsel will fell a man like a thunderbolt. Henry gazed respectfully at this formidable fungus, and was unable to repress a shudder. 'Nevertheless,' said he, 'it is certainly very appropriately named. It is around such a toadstool that one might expect to see a fairy tripping, a delicious little creature with golden hair. . . .

'And, by all that's wonderful,' cried he, 'figuratively speaking, I believe that is just what I *do* see!'

With trembling hands he garnered the lethal titbit, and wrapped it in his handkerchief beside the other, carefully interposing a fold of the linen to avoid any contact between them. 'Ella has always made nasty cracks at Nature,' said he. 'Now Nature shall have a crack at her.'

He at once hurried back to the cottage, where Ella greeted him with a smile. 'It is easy to smile when you have had two eggs for breakfast,' thought our hero. 'Let us see how you'll manage after having *Amanita phalloides* for lunch.' This reflection struck him as being highly diverting, and he accorded his wife a very creditable smirk in return, from which she concluded their little tiff was all forgotten. This she found especially gratifying, for she was a simple, primitive creature, and her double breakfast ration had caused the blood to flow warm and sluggish in her veins.

'See what I have found,' said Henry. 'Two mushrooms, and of different varieties. This one is a *Clavaria*, a wholesome fungus, with a decent, satisfying flavour.'

'And what,' said she, 'is this other, which looks so white and pearly?'

'Oh, that,' said he deceitfully, 'that is *Eheu fungaces.*'

'What a pretty name!' said she. 'But what a very odd shape! I mean, of course, for a mushroom.'

'Pay no attention to that,' said he. 'It is more nutritious than you can possibly imagine: it is rich in vitamins D, E, A, T, and H. What's more, it has a flavour fit for a king, so I shall eat it myself, for you can hardly be called kingly, not being built that way.'

'Ah, that is true,' said she, with a giggle. 'That is perfectly true, darling. Ha! Ha! I am not built that way.'

This reply set Henry back a hundred leagues, for he had expected her to assert a strong claim to the deadly mushroom, as soon as she heard him credit it with a superior vitamin content and flavour. However, he was quick-witted, and at once changed his tack. 'Nevertheless,' said he, 'you shall have this excellent mushroom, for I think you thoroughly deserve it.'

'Why, Henry,' she said, 'that is very sweet of you. How can I reward you for your kindness? What can a mere woman do, to show how she appreciates a good husband?'

'Mince them up,' said he, 'and cook them separately, so as not to confuse the flavours. Serve them each on a toast, and cover them liberally with grated cheese.'

'I will do that,' she said, 'though it goes to my heart to chop it.' She gave him a nudge and went into the kitchen, and began to dress and prepare the mushrooms. Henry waited in the sitting-room, thinking of a delicious creature, not a day more than twenty years old. Ella, peeking lovingly round the door, recognized the glimmer in his bird-like eye, and continued her cookery with a song in her heart. 'He deserves nothing but the best,' thought she, 'and he shall have it. He shall have the better mushroom, for he is a king among men, and he said it is highly nutritious. After all, I had two eggs for breakfast, and those, *tra-la-la,* were sufficient for me.

'Come, my dear,' said she, when all was done. 'Here is our lunch ready, and here are our two plates, mine with a blue ring and yours with a red one. Eat heartily, my angel, and soon you shall be rewarded for your kindness and consideration.'

Henry, who was peckish by reason of his diminished breakfast, wished moreover to fortify his tissues against the day when the true Goldilocks should arrive at *Three Bears Cottage*. He therefore sawed himself off a sizeable morsel and crammed it into his maw. He at once shot out of his chair, and began to leap, writhe, stagger, spin, curvet, gyrate, loop, and flounder all over the room. Simultaneously he was seized with giddiness, nausea, spots before the eyes, palpitations, convulsions, flatulence, and other symptoms too hideous to mention.

'What on earth is the matter, darling?' said his wife. 'Are you feeling unwell?'

'The devil!' he gasped. 'I have eaten the Death Angel! I have eaten *Amanita phalloides!*'

'Really, my dear!' said she in amazement. 'What an expression! Whatever can you be thinking of?'

'You b——!' cried he. 'Will you stand there bandying words? I am dying! I am poisoned! Run for a doctor. Do you hear?'

'Poisoned?' said she. 'By that mushroom? Why, Henry, that is the one you tried to palm off on me!'

'I confess it,' said he. 'I was feeling aggrieved and resentful. Forgive me. And, for heaven's sake, fetch me a doctor, or in five minutes I shall be dead.'

'I forgive you for trying to poison me,' said Ella. 'But I cannot forget that awful name you called me just now. No, Henry, a lady dog cannot run for a doctor. I shall go no further than to that powerfully built young wood-cutter who is chopping away at an elm tree down in the hollow. He has often whistled when I passed him, like an oriole in full song. I shall ask him what *he* thinks of a man who calls his wife such a name, and what he thinks of a man who brings home a thing like that to his wife. And I have no doubt at all he will tell me.'

Gavin O'Leary

THERE was a young, bold, active, and singularly handsome flea, who lived as blissful as a shepherd in Arcady upon the divine body of Rosie O'Leary. Rosie was an eighteen-year-old nursemaid in the comfortable home of a doctor in Vermont, and no flea has been better pastured than this one since the beginning of the world. He considered himself a landowner in a country overflowing with milk and honey, and he delighted in every undulation of the landscape.

Rosie was the merriest, most ardent, laughing, bounding, innocent, high-spirited creature that ever trod on earth, from which it follows that our flea was equally blessed in temperament and general physical tone. It is widely known that the flea imbibes more than half his weight at a single repast, from which it follows that not only the bodily health but the nervous condition, the emotions, the inclinations, and even the moral standards of whoever provides the meal are very directly transmitted to his diminutive guest.

Thus it came about that this particular flea bounded higher than most, and ceaselessly extolled his good fortune. All his nourishment came fresh and ruby from her untroubled heart and there was never such a gay, silly, glossy, high-jumping, well-developed flea as Gavin O'Leary. Gavin was his given name; the other he took from Rosie, as a nobleman takes his title from his domain.

There came a time when Gavin found something a little heady in his drink, and his whole being was filled with delicious dreams. On Thursday evening this sensation rose to a positive delirium. Rosie was being taken to the movies.

Our flea at that time had no great interest in the art of the motion picture. He sat through the first half of the performance in a nook that offered no view of what was going on. At ten o'clock he began to feel ready for his supper, and, as Rosie showed no signs of going home to bed, he resolved to picnic, as

it were, on the spot. He inserted his privileged proboscis in the near neighbourhood of her heart. His earlier exhilaration should have warned him that great changes were taking place in the nature and quality of the nectar on which he lived, but as Rosie was guileless and heedless, so therefore was Gavin O'Leary. Thus he was taken by surprise when his light and sparkling sustenance changed to a warm and drowsy syrup, with a fire smouldering under its sweetness, which robbed him of all his bounding enterprise. A tremor ran through his body, his eyes half closed, and when his shy retreat was suddenly and inexplicably invaded by an alien hand, he was neither amazed nor hopping mad, but crawled half-reluctantly away, looking over his shoulder with a languid simper, for all the world as if he were a mere bug.

Gavin took refuge in a cranny of the plush seat, and surrendered himself to the throbbing intoxication that filled his veins. He woke from his drunken sleep several hours later, with a slight sense of shame. It was early morning; Rosie and her companion were gone; the picture house was empty and no food was in sight. Gavin waited eagerly for the place to reopen, for his appetite was of the best. At the proper hour people began to file in. Gavin's seat was taken by a pale youth, who fidgeted impatiently until the performance began, and when the performance began, he sighed. Gavin, brushing his forefoot over his proboscis, for all the world like a toper who wipes his lips before taking a swig, entered between a pair of waistcoat buttons, and, without any affectation of saying grace, tapped his new host between the fourth and fifth rib, in order that he might drink as fresh and pure as it came.

I think it is Dante who describes a lover's blood as running pale and fiery like old wine. By this comparison the draught now sucked up by Gavin was vodka or absinthe at the very least. No sooner had he swallowed this potent philter than he began to pant, moan, and roll his eyes like a madman, and he could not clamber up fast enough out of the young man's shirt to a spot whence he could catch a glimpse of the object of what was now their joint adoration. It was none other than Miss Blynda Blythe, whose infinitely famous, infinitely glamourous face at this moment filled the greater part of the screen.

Gazing upon her, our flea was in the condition of one who has made a whole meal of a love potion. He felt his host's blood positively boiling within him. He was devoured, wrought-up, hysterical; his proboscis burned, throbbed, and tingled at the sight of that satiny skin; he wept, laughed, and finally began to rhyme like a demon. The fact is his host was a poet, or he could never have been such a lover. In consequence, no flea has ever loved, longed, and hungered as Gavin did, at his very first sight of Miss Blynda Blythe. (Except that one, dear Madame, which was availing itself of my hospitality, when you passed in your limousine last Thursday.)

All too soon the film came to its end, and Gavin rode home to a hall bedroom, where he spent the night on the young man's coat collar, looking over his shoulder at the fan magazines which this youth incessantly studied. Every now and then he would take a quick shot of that burning brew which was the cause of his furious passion. A number of lesser fleas, and other creatures of a baser sort, refreshed themselves at the same source and shared the night-long bacchanal. Their besotted host, confused between his itches, was too far gone even to scratch. The crazy drinkers were free to take their perilous fill, and the scene was worse than any opium den. Some wept and moaned their lives away in corners; some, dirty, unkempt, lost to the world, lay abandoned in feverish reverie; others sprang from the window, drowned themselves in the slop-pail, or took Keatings. Many, mad with desire, blunted their probosces on one or other of the glossy photographs of Blynda Blythe which adorned the mantelpiece and the screen.

Gavin, though he sipped and sipped till the potent liquor entered into the very tissues of his being, was made of sterner stuff. It was not for nothing that he had spent his youth on the finest flower of the indomitable immigrant stock. With the dawn his bold plan was made. His host rose from his uneasy slumbers, dashed off a few lines, and went out to seek his breakfast in a drugstore. Gavin rode boldly on the rim of his hat, taking his bearings from the position of the sun.

The poet walked westward for two or three blocks, and Gavin was grateful for the lift. But no sooner did the fellow veer off in a northerly direction in quest of his coffee and doughnut than

Gavin was down on the sidewalk, and hopping furiously on the first stage of his three-thousand-mile trek to the Coast. He hitchhiked when he could, but as he left the town behind him these opportunities grew fewer. The dust choked him, the hard surface proved lacerating to those sensitive feet, accustomed to nothing coaser than the silken skin of Rosie O'Leary. Nevertheless, when the red sunset beaconed where the long trail crossed the distant hills, a keen eye might have discerned the speck-like figure of Gavin, jigging lamely but gamely on.

It was long afterwards, and after Heaven knows what adventures by prairie, desert, and mountain, that a travel-worn, older, and gaunter Gavin entered Hollywood. He was gaunt, not merely by reason of his incredible exertions, but because of the knight-errant asceticism he had practised through all the hungry miles of the way. Fearing lest any full meal should fill him with some baser, alien mood, he had disciplined himself to take the merest semi-sip, except where he was well assured that his entertainer was also an adoring fan of Blynda Blythe.

He now hastened along Hollywood Boulevard in search of the world-famous Chinese Theatre. There, sinking on one knee, he reverently pressed his long proboscis to a certain beloved footprint set here in the cement of eternity. A keen-eyed producer noticed the knightly gesture as he drove by, and instantly conceived the idea of doing a new version of Cyrano de Bergerac. Gavin, having accomplished this act of homage, took the innocent equivalent of a glass of milk from the dimpled shoulder of a baby star, and began to ponder on how he might make contact with his idol.

He thought at first of striking up an acquaintance with some of the lounging, idle, disappointed fleas of the town, to find out from them which laundry she patronized, so that he might arrive like a male Cleopatra rolled up in some intimate article of her apparel. His wholesome pride rejected this backstairs approach. He dallied for a shuddering moment with the fierce temptation to perch on the cuff of an autograph hunter, and make a Fairbanks leap upon her as she signed the book. 'To spring upon her!' he muttered. 'To wreak my will upon her regardless of her cries and struggles! To plunge my cruel proboscis into her delicate epidermis!' But Gavin O'Leary was no brutal, cowardly

rapist. There was something upright and manly in his nature that demanded he meet his mate as a friend and as an equal. He was fully conscious of the immense social gulf that lay between a poor, unknown flea and a rich and famous film star. Painful as the thought was to him, he did not avert his eyes from the racial barrier. But to Gavin barriers were made to be over-leaped. He felt that he must be recognized as a fellow being, and respected as . . . as what? 'Why that's it!' he cried as the inspiration struck him. 'Respected as a fellow artist! Who has not heard of performing fleas? Whenever did a troupe of players travel without a numerous companionship of my dark, brittle, and vivacious kin?'

The decision made, nothing remained but to crash the studios, as the ambitious phrase it. Gavin had certain misgivings at the thought of permitting an agent to handle him. The only alternative was to mingle with the ranks of shabby extras who hung about the gates of Blynda's studio in the hope of being called in on some emergency. Fortune favours the brave; he had not been waiting there many weeks when an assistant director dashed out, crying in an urgent voice: 'Say! Any of you guys got a performing flea? Anybody know where I can hire one?'

The word was spread. The extras on the sidewalk began to search themselves hastily. Genuine professional flea masters patrolled the boulevards rounding up and coralling their troupes, which they had, with the inhumanity of their kind, turned out to forage for themselves during the bad times. While all this *brouhaha* was spreading through the town, with 'Yipee i ay! Yipee i ay!' re-echoing from Gower Street to Culver City, Gavin boldly entered the studio, and took up a point of vantage on the producer's desk. 'At least,' thought he, 'I am first in the queue.'

Some flea masters soon entered, carrying their recaptured artistes in pill boxes and phials. Gavin surveyed his rivals, and saw that every one of them bore the indefinable stamp of the bit player. He could hardly suppress a sneer.

When all were assembled: 'We've got a part here for the right flea,' said the producer. 'It's not big, but it's snappy. Listen, this flea's going to have the chance to play opposite Blynda Blythe. It's a bedroom scene, and there's a close two-shot. He's

going to bite her on the shoulder in a lodging-house scene. Say, where are your fleas from, feller?'

'Dey're Mex, boss,' replied the impressario he had addressed. 'Mexican flea, him lively. Him jumpa, jumpa——'

'That's enough,' replied the producer coldly. 'This scene's laid in the East, and when I shoot a scene it's authentic. You can't fool the public these days. Come on, boys, I want a New England flea.'

As he spoke he spread the contract out before him. A babble arose from the flea masters, all of whom now swore their fleas had been bred on Plymouth Rock and raised on none but Lowells, Cabots, and Lodges. While they still argued, Gavin dipped his proboscis in the ink bottle and scrawled his minute signature on the dotted line.

The effect was electrifying. 'The darned little guy!' said the producer. 'He's got what it takes. While all you fellers are shooting off your mouths, he muscles right in and gets his moniker on the contract. Reminds me of the time when *I* broke into this industry,' he added to a sycophant who nodded smiling agreement. Gavin was hurried on to the set, where his coming was eagerly awaited. 'You wouldn't like your stand-in to do this scene, Miss Blythe?' said an over-obsequious assistant. Gavin's heart sank.

'No,' said Miss Blythe. 'When it's a champagne scene, I want real champagne, and when I get bitten by a flea I stand for a real flea bite.'

'Get that written down and over to the publicity department,' said the producer to another hanger-on. 'O.K., Jack,' to the director. 'I'll watch you shoot.'

'Better run it over once or twice in rehearsal,' said the director. 'Somebody stand by with a glass of brandy for Miss Blythe.'

'You're not to go on if you feel faint, Blynda,' said the producer.

'It's all right, Benny,' said Blynda. 'It's for my art.'

'Look how it is, Blynda,' said the director, taking up the script. 'This is where you've walked out on Carew, just because you're nuts about him. You want to see if he'll follow you down to the depths. You're yearning for him. And you're lying on the lodging-house bed, crying. And you feel a bite, just where he

kissed you in the scene we're going to shoot when that goddam Art Department gets the country-club revel set done. Get the point, Blynda? You feel the bite. For a moment you think it's Carew.'

'Yes, Jack. I think I see that. I think I understand.'

'And, Jesus! you turn your head, hoping against hope it's him——'

'——and it's only the flea!' she nodded gravely. 'Yes, I can feel that. I can play it.'

'Bet your life you can play it! Okay, get on the bed. Where's Make-up? Got Miss Blythe's tears ready?'

Blynda waved the crystal vial aside. She shook her head and smiled bravely at the director. 'I shan't need phoney tears, Jack. Not if it's Carew.'

At these words a look and a murmur passed through all the numerous company. Actors and technicians alike felt sympathy and admiration for the plucky girl. Her unrequited real-life passion for the handsome, sneering leading man was no secret. In fact, it was the subject of almost hourly bulletins from the Publicity Department.

It was whispered that 'Repressed Carew,' as he was nicknamed by the psychology-conscious younger set of Hollywood, was a man contemptuous of love in any form whatever. Only those who had seen him at his mirror knew that he made an exception in favour of his own supercilious profile. This was the man Blynda hopelessly adored, and Blynda was the girl Gavin was about to bite.

Next moment the director had said a quiet word to his assistant, and the assistant, like a human megaphone, blared the command to the farthest corner of the vast sound stage. 'QUIET for Miss Blythe and Mr. Gavin O'Leary rehearsing.'

Gavin's heart swelled. To become at one stroke a successful film actor and a happy lover is enough to intoxicate a more down-to-earth personality than a flea's. Blynda pressed her face to the pillow and wept. Her delicious shoulder blades heaved with emotion, and Gavin stood ready for the leap. He wished only that he had a delicate scrap of cambric, that he might wipe his proboscis and fling it into the hands of a nearby grip. He felt the gesture would have shown a nice feeling.

His regrets were cut short by a crisp word: 'Mr. O'Leary!' He sprang high into the air, landed, and struck deep.

'Boy! did you see that jump?' cried the director to the producer. 'Watch him bite! The little guy gives it all he's got.'

'Make a note for me to get him under long-term contract.' said the producer to his secretary.

'What the hell am I doing on this floozy's shoulder?' murmured Gavin in a petulant voice. 'I wonder when my gorgeous Carew is going to make his entrance.' Forgive him, reader! it was the drink speaking.

At that very moment a deep, rich, jocular voice was heard. 'Hey, what goes on here? New talent, eh? Stealing my scene!'

All turned to eye the newcomer with respect; Blynda and Gavin with something more. Blynda wallowed as invitingly as she could upon the bed; Gavin, with a leap that approached if not surpassed the world's record, flung himself upon his new idol's breast, sobbing in mingled ecstasy and shame.

'The little fellow seems to take to me,' said the actor good-humouredly. 'Going to be buddies, eh? Good material that, Jack, for the Publicity Department.' These words marked the beginning, and, as far as the speaker was concerned, the motivation, of a friendship between the oddly assorted pair. Soon they became inseparable.

The biographer prefers to draw a veil over the next stage of Gavin's career. To know all is to excuse all, but to know less in a case of this sort is to have less to excuse. Suffice it to say that Carew's love for himself continued what Blynda's love for Carew had begun, and, as it was marked by a fervour and a constancy very rare in Hollywood, fervid and constant was Gavin's unhallowed passion for Carew.

It was not long before ugly rumours were in circulation concerning the flea star. People whispered of his fantastic costumes, his violet evening suits, his epicene underwear, his scent-spray showerbath, and of strange parties at his bijou home in Bel Air. A trade paper, naming no names, pointed out that if individuals of a certain stripe were considered bad security risks by the State Department, they must be even more of a danger in the most influential of all American industries. It seemed only a matter of time before Gavin would be the centre of an open

scandal, and his pictures be picketed by the guardians of our morals.

But time works in many ways, and the actor's face withered even faster than Gavin's reputation. Soon he was rejected everywere for the rôle of the lover, and must either play character parts or go in for production. Character never having been his strong point, he felt himself better fitted to be a producer. Now, producers are known to be God-like creatures, and the chief point of resemblance is that they must either create new stars or have no public.

Carew, of course, had Gavin as an ace up his sleeve. Splendid parts, full of nimble wit and biting satire, were written for the flea actor, but nowhere could a new beauty be found who was worthy to play opposite him. The talent scouts ranged far and wide, but their eulogies carried little conviction. At last, however, a short list was made. Carew read it over, shook his head, and threw it down on his dressing table. 'There's not a winner among them,' he muttered. 'That means I'm not a genius as a producer.'

He retired to bed feeling thoroughly dissatisfied with himself for the first time in many years. To Gavin, his supper that night seemed to have a smack of clean and salutary bitterness about it. His nerves steadied themselves, his mind cleared; he saw Carew for what he was, and the hour of his salvation was upon him. At such moments the mind naturally reverts to thoughts of old times, early days, youth, innocence, and the bright faces of the past.

Gavin O'Leary rose and ripped off the flimsy, decadent night attire he had recently affected. He sought, with a leap that was already less mincing and effeminate, the list upon the writing table. The ink-well stood open; to him its sable depths were a positive Jordan, in which, if he dipped seven times, he might yet cease to be a social leper. He immersed himself with a shudder, and, clambering painfully out, he stood for a moment upon the dark rim of the ink-well, nude, shivering, gasping, yet tensing his muscles for a leap to a certain spot at the head of the list. He made it, and made it without a splash or blot. With the accuracy of a figure skater, but with all the slow difficulty of a treacle-clogged fly, he described the word

Rosie in a perfect imitation of the sprawling hand of the chief talent scout.

Another painful leap, and he was back, sobbing and choking, in the bitter, glutinous ink. The hot weather had thickened it. This time he completed the word *O'Leary*. Five times more, and her address was written. Gavin, utterly worn out, black as your hat, half-poisoned by ink, sank exhausted on the blotting pad. But a great gladness had dawned in his heart.

The ruse was successful. Rosie was brought to the Coast for a screen test. Needless to say, she passed it triumphantly. Gavin, with a thankful sigh, nestled once more upon her heart, and drank deep of its cleansing, life-giving vintage. With that draught the last of his aberration fell away from him like a shoddy, outworn garment. The past was dead. He was a new flea, and he had earned his right to be the lover of the most beautiful Irish colleen, and the greatest little actress, and the most important human being, in the world. And as Miss O'Leary soon began to think of herself in the same terms, you may be sure they lived happily ever after.

The Tender Age

How pleasant to have travelled the world as you have, Mr. Renvil! Six months here, a year there—always moving on! We parsons are tied to our parishes like watchdogs to their kennels, barking once a week, as best we can, to keep away the Eternal Prowler. Well. Mr. Dodd, I should not mind being tied to such a spot as this. I should like it very much; one gets weary of wandering. I am hoping to be able to stay here permanently; I hope it will turn out that way.

Go back to your chair, Patricia. Mr. Renvil did not come here to be bothered by little girls. He came here to have tea with your father and me. Oh please, Mummy, let me sit with Mr. Renvil.

Pattikins, you heard your mother; sit in your place and show how well-behaved you can be. Oh, but please, Mr. Dodd, don't disturb your little daughter on my account.

Her mother likes her to obey; I am perhaps a little lax in that respect. Let me see—what were we saying? Oh, you really think of staying here for good? That will be very nice for us, I'm sure. It's a lonely part of the country. There are very few people of our sort; very few farmers; very few cottagers, even. It will be very nice for me, Mr. Dodd, if I am able to stay. I have long wanted to make my home somewhere, but something has always come over me, call it a sudden urge if you like, and in a moment my plans are changed and I am off.

Moving on! Moving on! Well, you have certainly seen the world, no doubt about that! All sorts of places, all sorts of people! When you were in tropical parts, I suppose you saw savages; they have always interested me. Even cannibals perhaps?—Savages, yes indeed. Savages one sees everywhere, and not only in the tropics. As to the cannibals and cannibalism, I can't pretend to be an authority on that sort of thing. But I have had enough of the tropics, and of foreign countries altogether. The English countryside is unbeatable. Your hills and woods

here are the very best of it. A garden like this is my idea of heaven. It is here I should like to stay.

Patty, I have told you once, you must not climb on Mr. Renvil. Mr. Renvil did not come here to be climbed and clambered upon. How do you know Mr. Renvil likes little girls? Not everyone likes them, especially when they are ill-behaved. Oh, but I do, Mrs. Dodd. I'm sure no one likes little girls better than I do. I think they are absolutely delicious, absolutely delightful.

I think, Mary, you are making too much fuss. Our guest has told us he has no objection. Let us do him the courtesy of taking his word for it. Patty has taken a great fancy to you, Mr. Renvil. She is not often so eager to sit on anyone's knee.—It seems to me, George, you are putting Mr. Renvil quite on the spot, as they say. Do you expect him to come out with it to your face that he finds the child a nuisance? I'm sure he is too polite for that.

I might be, Mrs. Dodds, if it were necessary, but in this case it is not. I think the little girls are delectable creatures, especially when they are six or seven. Now, Mr. Renvil, we are blunt people hereabouts. Brutally frank, as some might put it. And I couldn't help noticing last time you came to see us—or was it the first time, after you met my husband on the road? I think it must have been the first time; I don't think Patty was home last Tuesday. Well, whenever it was, she had already begun to clamber upon you, and it seemed to me you were anxious to be rid of her. When she came climbing and squeezing and nuzzling, I'm sure I saw you flinch away. I felt you were quite flustered and upset.

My dear, I really believe you are imagining things and perhaps embarrassing our visitor. If Mr. Renvil feels anything of that sort I'm sure he will be candid enough to say so, and Patty can go and play with her toys. Yes, dear, but some people hesitate to say they dislike children; it is so often said to be the sign of a bad heart.

I'm sure Mr. Renvil is above such a vulgar prejudice, and I hope he will give us credit for being above it ourselves. Novelists and the people who write for the cinema find it easy to identify the villain of the piece by giving him an aversion to children and animals. They have him kick a dog or slap a child, and this in turn

strengthens the popular misconception. There was some sort of writer once staying in the village, Mr. Renvil, and he explained it all to us. It was most interesting. Children, dogs, and, I think, cats. Not so much cats, dear, because so many people have rather a horror of them. Lord Nelson did, for one, and all sorts of famous people. Dr. Johnson, though, loved his cat.

Dr. Johnson was a great friend of the Church, and now you tell me he was a cat-lover. Perhaps I should be grateful on the first count, but I have never much liked the worthy Doctor, and I shall not change my opinion because of his fondness for cats. I hope you are not a great admirer, Mr. Renvil. I hope you don't think me guilty of lèse-majesté. Oh, no, Mr. Dodd, not in the least, I assure you. I myself could never feel very warmly about Dr. Johnson. A tremendous mind, no doubt, but he is not one of those great figures I could imagine myself meeting and liking if we were contemporaries. I was greatly put off when first I read of his eating habits. When I think of a man gorging and gulping like some ravenous cannibal, some ravenous animal, with his face bent over almost into his food, and the veins swelling out on his forehead, it makes me positively shudder, as if someone were walking over my grave. Excuse me, Mrs. Dodd, if my description is unpleasantly vivid. I am quoting almost exactly what I read.

Oh, I don't shudder so easily, Mr. Renvil. I am not one of your sensitive persons; I am thick-skinned. I am the practical, down-to-earth member of the family. But tell me frankly, and once and for all—are not sticky little fingers, and hugging and nuzzlings rather unpleasant to you? Because I really thought I saw you shudder, just as you describe, the first time Patty came climbing on your knee. Well, I am not a family man. I am unmarried, as you know. That may make me a little awkward. But as it happens I have the very greatest fondness for little girls. Little girls of six or seven—to me at that age they are just at perfection. They are formed already, and still so fresh and tender, and they have such charming ways. They have not yet reached the lanky stage or the scrawny stage. They positively melt in one's heart.

And little boys? Do you like little boys equally? We put Patty first, of course, but we have often wished she had a little

brother. I like little boys, Mrs. Dodd, but they are so very tough in these days, with all the comic strips and the cowboy pictures. A little girl like this one on my knee—I don't think I could ask for more than just such a little girl.

Well, Patty, it seems that Mr. Renvil does not mind you too much. So I suppose you may stay where you are until he puts you down. I know Mr. Renvil likes me, Mummy. I knew it all the time. The very first day he came to tea he whispered in my ear. He whispered he could eat me up.

I think I know what misled you, Mrs. Dodd. I have some sort of little nervous twitch every now and then. I sometimes give a little start and shudder. Why yes, I just noticed. I think no one would notice unless they were watching as I was—watching, I mean, to see if Patty was bothering you. I think highly-strung people, people of talent, often have a little nothing of that sort. Like Lord Nelson and his aversion to cats. Mr. Dodd has a cousin who is extremely gifted musically; it is thought he could have played at concerts had he really taken it up. He sometimes starts almost out of his chair.

Do you like pussy cats, Mr. Renvil? Would you rather have a little girl or a pussy cat? Oh, a little girl, Patricia. I don't like cats at all.

Would you rather have a little girl than a bunny rabbit? Why, yes indeed. Rabbit is quite nice, but I would rather have a little girl.

There used to be lots of bunny rabbits but they all died because of a wicked disease. I think there is one who lives in the big wood on the top of the hill, but Daddy won't take me there. Now, Patty, you are always whining and wheedling to go to the wood. Daddy has the parish to look after, and Daddy has his sermon to write, and he has told you there are no rabbits there.

Shall you keep the house you are living in at present if you decide to stay, Mr. Renvil? I hardly think so, I shall probably look around for something a little larger. One never knows, of course; one's plans may change at a moment's notice. But I do sincerely hope that nothing will prevent my settling here.

No more sudden urges, eh? Well, we shall be glad if you can avoid them. The wanderlust, I suppose you would call it? A hunger to be moving on, moving on. I suppose so, Mr. Dodd. It's

a matter of fate, I suppose. I think you might describe it as a sort of hunger.

Mr. Renvil, if you had a little girl would you take her to the wood? Yes, my dear, I very well might. I am not clever enough to write sermons, so I have more time than your father. It would be very nice to take a little girl to the wood.

Ah, the Church clock, striking six! The sunset gun I think they call it in India or somewhere. We have finished tea long ago. Can I persuade you to take a glass of sherry, Mr. Renvil? An aperitif, as they say in France? No, thank you, Mrs. Dodd; I have no need of it. It is high time I was on my way. I am walking this evening, and if I am not home by seven I shall hear murmuring in the kitchen, quite loud, and very gloomy in tone. I am most grateful for your kindness, Mr. Dodd. Thank you both so much. And I will try, indeed I will, to control any sudden urge. Patricia, may I kiss you good-bye?

Mummy, can I walk up the road with Mr. Renvil? Can I walk with him as far as the wood? I could just peep inside and see a great big bunny rabbit. Now, Patty, Patty, Pattikins! I think Mr. Renvil has been more than nice to you already. It is time to stop asking things and bothering him.

It would be a pleasure to me, Mrs. Dodd. You have no idea what a pleasure it would be to me. But it must be at least half a mile to where the woods begin, and half a mile back again. I'm sure those plump little legs would not carry her more than half as far. And I could hardly see you walking back all alone, my dear. Oh yes, I could, Mr. Renvil. I go all by myself to the village, and that is farther than the wood. I walk there and back all by myself. Don't I, Daddy? Don't I, Mummy? Please Mr. Renvil, ask Mummy to let me go with you to the wood!

Now, Patty, that is whining and wheedling and nuzzling up all in one. Mr. Renvil doesn't know what to do with little girls who cling. You are strangling him; you are taking his breath away. Mr. Renvil can hardly breathe.—Mary, my dear, I think we are having altogether too much fuss over Patty this evening. The child can walk back by herself; Mr. Renvil has said she will be no trouble to him. It is daylight still; we have no bandits or wolves in this part of the world. She can be back in half an hour or so, in ample time for her supper. She will be off your

hands when you are busy, just when she is most trouble to you.

Well, very well, if you really don't mind, Mr. Renvil. All I hope is that Patty is not too much for you. Don't let her give you one of your sudden urges, just as we are hoping you will settle here. Oh, as to that, Mrs. Dodd, it is a matter of fate, a matter of fate. No man can avoid his destiny.

Come, my little dear, we will walk together to the wood, and if there is time enough we will take a tiny peep inside it. Can we really, Mr. Renvil? We'll see a great big rabbit. Good-bye, Mummy! Good-bye, Daddy!

Good-bye, Patty! Good-bye, Pattikins! Good-bye, Mr. Renvil!

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