Gerald Kersh

THE TERRIBLY WILD FLOWERS



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The Terribly Wild Flowers

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NINE STORIES BY

GERALD KERSH

Remploy

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The Terribly Wild Flowers

'There is no Official Secrecy blanketing the origins of the so-called "mysterious" outbreaks of fire which almost totally destroyed the botanical gardens at Forfex in Kent. Only in this age of panic it was regarded as expedient to keep the matter quiet until it was reasonably certain that the situation was well under control; which we fervently hope and believe is now the case.

'Hysteria is often best treated by a sharp slap in the face. Hysteria is not amenable to reason. But one cannot slap a billion faces simultaneously, and we live in a period of mass-hysteria, of wild credulity, mad conjecture and impending stampede. The intelligent observer must feel, just now, as the American cowhand must feel riding herd with a thunderstorm impending.

'If the half-educated scribblers of so-called "Science Features" had got hold of this story a year or so ago, a generation hungry for that which is not – a breed nurtured on fear and rumour, that cut its teeth on flying saucers and weaned its imagination on flight by rocket

anywhere out of this world – might have lost the little that remains of reason. . . .'

I quote Dr Angus Huish, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, some time of Edinburgh University – as one might gather from his dour, pawky, yet colourful manner of expressing himself – a masterful, scholarly man, both bold and imaginative, who, if he could not have his way by a sort of didactic bullying somewhat in the style of Lord Macaulay, had recourse to a knack he had of exciting curiosity, and sometimes fierce controversy, even among reticent and cautious scientific men all over the world. Huish was a jurist among Doctors of Medicine. His speciality was the human brain – among the fifteen thousand million neurons of which lie the dry, picked bones of thousands of hopeful exploratory theories that died in their tracks.

There is a childishness about a certain type of abstract thinker – he is like the astronomer in the fable who, walking at night with his eyes on the distant stars, contemplating the wonders of the heavens, fell into a hole in the ground and broke his back. Einstein, for example, engrossed in his esoteric mathematics, gave us an Atom Bomb. Had he foreseen the consequences of his stupendous equations, he would have put his papers in the stove; for he was the mildest of men. Nobel, working to make nitroglycerin safe for peaceful purposes, simply failed to consider that man is a warlike animal. It is certain that the inventors of useful, necessary insecticides did not calculate that what may paralyse the nerve-centres of a fly may be modified to paralyse the nerve-centres of a man – they did not foresee Nerve Gas. These geniuses live a

dream-life. I know a researcher in Philadelphia who, in the course of his inquiries into the origins of cancer, has isolated certain horribly dangerous crystals by means of which unhealable inflammations may be transferred from one cellular organism to another. When I asked him if such crystals might be used for warlike purposes he replied, quite appalled, 'Yes, but that is not what they are *for*!'

Great as he was, there was a little too much grey Edinburgh granite in Angus Huish's make-up, and, as in the case of Kipling's orang-outang, 'too much ego in his cosmos'. It is doubtful whether he ever experienced any such emotion as pity. To Huish, human agony was symptomatic, and nothing more – a clue, or combination of clues, which might lead to some hard-and-fast conclusion – and disease was a problem to be grappled with; ruthlessly, if necessary, but inexorably.

There was something about him that reminded me of his pitiless predecessor, the ill-famed Dr Knox, the great anatomist of Edinburgh who paid cash on the nail for corpses and asked no questions.

God knows whether such men are a blessing or a curse to mankind.

It was in the early 1920's that Dr Angus Huish published his paper on his findings concerning poisons in the human blood-stream and their reactions upon plants. This is phytopharmacology, as any schoolboy will tell you now.

I fall naturally into Dr Angus Huish's Macaulayan way of classical speech – which, incidentally, he punctuated with many a damn and a blast, which I dare not employ here. Dr Huish was what they used to call a 'strong-talking man', the like of which has no place in a family magazine.

But he wrote his paper, or thesis, and was half-gratified and half-irritated to receive from all over the world, certain confirmation of his findings.

Dr Banerji of Calcutta confirmed them. Dr Slameda Sauer, called the Madame Curie of neurology, wrote what she called *A Paper Upon a Paper*. A well-known psychologist, whom Dr Huish (rightly or wrongly) regarded with contempt, wrote a pamphlet which he entitled 'Notes On Sensation', indicating that idiots are by no means insensitive.

Dr Angus Huish had, very simply, noticed that a 1/100 solution of a true psychotic's blood would inevitably stunt the growth of a plant, and eventually kill it. He detected a toxic principle, he said, in the blood of the incurably mentally deranged. When the paroxysm was at its height, Dr Huish said, the infusion of blood was most virulent in its application to plants.

Then he wrote some owlish treatise on mycology, or the study of fungi. He plunged into some study of the drugs that induce madness – the *phallidae,* for instance – used by the *Shamans* of Mongolia and the sorceresses of Finland; all to induce frenzy. The best way to combat a disease (or problem) Dr Huish decided, was to produce it experimentally, and study it experimentally from its beginnings, in all its progressive phases.

And, as Dr Huish saw it, the high hope for the health of the mind of man lay within the structure of the vegetable.

He argued; was the cellular structure of a plant necessarily as simple as it was generally agreed to be? A rock to break your head against in argument, Dr Angus Huish said that any plant had, in effect, a power of adaptation

superior to that of any man, considering that a plant had no constructive consciousness. He spoke as a brain-specialist.

Darkly hinting, Dr Huish muttered of the possibility of some vegetable catalytic agent – that is to say, something that hastens a chemical reaction, while remaining itself unchanged. But vegetable, vegetable! Flesh is grass.

Ah, but what grass most closely approximates to flesh? Evidently, grass which directly eats flesh; sundew, and the Venus Fly Trap – which secrete something like human digestive juices.

Well and good. But at this point Dr Angus Huish found himself at a biological dead-end.

It was as if, all of a sudden, he had been compelled to answer some such question as, 'Why is a yawn infectious?'– while yawning in sympathy. He found himself somewhere beyond the microscope and the microtome in a region verging upon the spiritual. And he hated this.

Nevertheless, Dr Angus Huish was not out of luck. 'Luck of the Devil', some called it – for he was a convinced materialist – or he might have starved. But he was heir to several hundred acres and had enough to live and work on.

More fortunately yet, some stolid technician at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wrote a paper confirming by research Dr Angus Huish's theory that a proper balance of uric acid in the human blood-stream serves to activate that part of the brain with which you reason, or make sense. By rod and rule and equation, this gentleman proved that uric acid (which had hitherto been regarded as one of the causes of rheumatism) was a strong stimulant of the mind. Other researchers, similarly inspired,

separated a powerful uric acid derivative, commonly known as Purine.

Felicitously, again, Dr Bligh of Minnesota devoted much time and experimentation to the synthesis of certain Purine derivatives, samples of which were sent to Dr Huish, who, meanwhile, had not been idle. He had published his paper on *The Affinities Of Protoplasm*. Protoplasm, as everybody knows, involves all living tissue – which enables the present-day reader to understand what the poet meant when he said, 'All are but parts of one Stupendous Whole.'

In other words, all life is one life. Angus Huish was hard, but he was honest, in a bitter kind of way. Somewhere in the granite of his composition was a crack open to conviction.

His thesis was (for him) almost mystical in its content. In his heavy, and often technical, classical periods, he put forward a preposterous proposition – that, in effect, power lies in madness! According to Dr Angus Huish, the master of the earth must be that organism which most effectively eats up its fellows, indiscriminately.

By Dr Huish's reckoning, therefore, the ultimate master of the world in which we live must be an intelligent, omnivorous creature.

Man eats anything and everything. A pig will eat most things but is, in its piggish way, selective, and therefore doomed to extinction. But grass eats the pig in the end. Grass eats man.

All flesh is grass.

So, Dr Angus Huish joined the battle with the vegetable world, to batter it into bondage. Now as, in cases of mental disease, much may be learned by inducing, say, a

temporary schizophrenia in an otherwise normal subject; so Dr Huish took it upon himself to cultivate something like a human intelligence in plants.

Madness, you may say; still, Dr Huish's luck held. The old Earl of Forfex died and his son was ruined by the tax-gatherers. The old Earl had been a fanatical botanist, and his inconspicuous son, the 7th Earl, had not only followed in his footsteps but outpaced him, having written a monograph about cleistogamous flowers; these being tiny, scarcely noticeable things that never open to the sun, fertilize themselves within the bud and grow underfoot. 'Just like young Forfex,' people said.

Forfex Castle in Kent, with its botanical gardens, being taken over by the National Trust, Dr Huish sprang upon the hothouses like a tiger . . . but in the name of humanity. And nobody was more pleased than Lord Forfex at this turn of events which put him out of the Castle, which he hated, put him into the keeper's lodge, which he liked, and set him in proximity to Dr Huish, whom he admired, and who forthwith made him a laboratory assistant; for the Earl of Forfex was a Master of Science and a handy drudge for someone like Huish to bully and cajole and be adored by.

I do not believe that any scientist was more fortunate in his assistants. Never mind the men of learning that came to Forfex from all over the world – consider old Jack Hopkins. This was a slum-bred Cockney whose father had been a postman. Jack Hopkins, destined to follow in his father's way, had started life as a messenger-boy in a pill-box cap. But he was born, in the slums of Battersea, with what they call 'a green thumb'. There was something

about him which growing green things appeared to understand. As a child he acquired a peculiar reputation as a healer of sick plants. It was, 'Jackie, dear, look at my poor ole aspidistra, *you'll* soon cure 'er of the sut from the chimbleys.' Or, 'Jack, me boy, do what you can for this 'ere geranium and I'll gi' you a penny.'

In those dreary grey streets by Battersea Bridge housewives get cravings for something leafy or flowery about the house; but plants do not thrive there. The dirt in the flower-pots soon goes sour, and the light is deficient. It was assumed that there must be some quintessential sweetness in little Jack Hopkins that counteracted the acidulous quality of the Battersea flower-pots, for it was generally agreed, 'What Jack touches thrives.'

It did. He had what some countrymen call 'the touch'. There was one metaphysician who seriously claimed to see a certain relationship between man and vegetable, in Jack Hopkins' curious zoological intuition.

Hopkins had a skin like stone, hardened by perpetual contact with glassy-fibred vegetables – yet sensitized by his queer understanding of what he handled. Similarly, I daresay, hard-handed old nurses 'have a way' with children, and can soothe a feverish forehead or coax a reluctant appetite when the gentlemen with black bags give up in despair. Somewhere, love comes into it; I do not know exactly where, but it makes itself felt, through the horny calluses of ten thousand darning-needles, and the memories of untold frustrations.

So it was with Jack Hopkins. He could make things grow: he had only to handle a seed and it responded to his touch. Aaronberg or Milwaukee insists that this 'green thumb' is a matter of glandular secretions, and Angus

Huish tends to agree with him. But when Myerscough of Manchester suggests that in this glandular agreement there must be a certain spiritual contact between animal and vegetable, Huish agrees again.

Hopkins was the only man with whom Dr Angus Huish never argued. You may argue a point, you may dispute a theory; but it is a waste of time to make controversy against incontrovertible fact, such as is contained in the kind of old wives' tales upon which Jack Hopkins was brought up, and the like of which ran in the undercurrent of Huish's strange, inquiring mind.

Huish could snort at erudite theories of agricultural maladjustment. Indeed, when Melville Bartlett tried to speak to him of certain evils attendant upon the cultivation of the poppy, he told that learned gentleman to go and teach his grandmother to suck eggs. But when Jack Hopkins growled, 'Ill weeds always thrive,' his employer nodded, and agreed: 'Jack puts it in a nutshell.'

Cantankerousness aside, one wondered, exactly what had the Edinburgh doctor at the back of his head?

Some picked on 'ill weeds', making reference to the human variety – Huish being a brain-specialist. There was, indeed, in one of the lesser medical journals, some correspondence in connection with the preternatural strength of madmen in relation to the terrible power of survival of savage herbs.

To which, Jack Hopkins said, 'Gawd save the King, Doctor Huish! There's no sich thing as a savage 'erb! Why, would you call your mother savage because she took 'er dinner off a lamb chop? Would you call a lamb savage because it took a snack off a bit o' clover? Well, I mean to say—' He stopped short.

Dr Huish replied, 'Leave my mother out of this, and concentrate on pitcher plants, sundew and Venus Fly Trap. . . . What do you mean to say?'

'It's kind o' funny, Doctor.'

'What's funny, man?'

'Well . . . might I ask what that stuff is we been feeding the sundew and the Venus Fly Trap? A little tube-full a day, you know?'

'Ten grammes. No, you may not ask. Mind your business.'

'So I do, sir. But it's funny, that's all.'

'Oh?' said Dr Huish, with a kind of lowering glee. 'Funny again, is it? Out with it!'

'The Venus Fly Trap and the sundew,' said Hopkins.

'Make sense, park-keeper!' shouted Dr Huish.

But Jack Hopkins was not to be hurried. No true gardener is. He said, 'I'll try, if you'll be patient. It's not for the likes of me to ask the likes of you what you're a-doing of—'

'—Bluidy right it's not. Get to business.'

'The sundew is a slow-moving kind o' plant. It's what they call carnivorous, meaning it eats meat.'

'The point, the point! Come to the point, man!'

'Well, so do you eat meat, and so do I. I had stew for my dinner, and very nice too. Meat is very good for plants. There's nothing richer than graveyard soil, I'm told. But as a gentleman you go easy. You don't guzzle. You mind your manners and don't gollop.' Hopkins paused to light a pipe; he was in the habit of smoking that spoiled shag which is used to fumigate greenhouses – the stuff known in the eighteenth century as 'mundungus'. Then he went on, 'The sundew moves slow, sir. What is more, it prefers

carrion. And why not? Many's the lady and gentleman that would turn their nose up at a fresh pheasant or a bit o' venison that wasn't properly hung. A saddle o' mutton's got no taste unless you hang 'im up three or four weeks. Believe me, a plant knows what's what, sir, and knows its table-manners too.'

Dr Huish knew better than to interrupt Hopkins at this point, so he merely made a characteristic gesture of impatience, folding and unfolding his arms and legs and ruffling what was left of his hair.

'The sundew,' Jack Hopkins continued, 'secretes in 'er 'air a sort of a perfume what attracts flies, which it eats. Well, so do ladies and gentlemen, only they buy it in little bottles; and they don't eat flies. But Frenchmen eat frogs, and frogs eat flies. I see you're getting a little bit impatient, sir. I'm getting to my point. You wouldn't catch me putting a frog in *my* mouth; but that's neither 'ere or there. Our sundew is acting funny.'

'Indeed? How so?'

'That there flower bit my Nellie.'

'Now I'll tell you what, my friend,' said Dr Huish, in a threatening voice, 'you may be a useful sort of man around a garden, but if you carry on like this, as sure as fate I'll have you certified, damn me if I don't!'

Now Lord Forfex interposed, in his soft, authoritative voice, 'Hold hard, Huish, pray! Now then, Mr Hopkins. Nellie is your dog, I believe.'

'Yes, m'lord, and thanks for talking civil.'

'The sundew bit her, you say?'

'In a manner of speaking, m'lord.'

'Since when can a sundew bite?' growled Dr Huish.

'It can't,' said Hopkins. 'Also, it don't like fresh meat.

What's more, it moves slower than the hour-hand of a clock. But I'm telling you without a word of a lie that our sundew reached out, quick as a snake, and fastened itself to Nellie's nose. Drew blood, too. That's all.'

Dr Huish called upon a Being whose existence he doubted to strike him dead if he could make head or tail of what he called Hopkins's 'cockney jargon'. Touching his forelock – gardeners have respect for the mysteries of life – Hopkins retorted, 'The job being three parts done already, best not write yourself an extra invitation; and make sure that you're welcome first, sir.'

Then Forfex said, 'Your Nellie is a good little terrier, Hopkins, I know. She's a real gardener's dog – a ratter and a mouser, yes; but you'd never catch her putting her nose into a plant. Something deucedly odd here.'

'Like I've been trying to say, m'lord. I've had Nellie for twelve years, from a pup, and never knew her put her nose or any other part of her near something as was growing, sir. She'll pin a rat or a cat, or a man for that matter, or anything as walks on four legs what comes nigh summat as grows. But Nellie wouldn't go near a flower. My opinion is that this 'ere sundew has took to secreting summat attractive to dogs. And the same applies to the Venus Fly Trap. And I'll tell you for why: Last night our Venus Fly Trap gave out a smell like a perfume, and before I knew what I was doing I bent down to sniff. Venus Fly Trap's got no perfume a human bein' can appreciate, in general; but it snapped at me, and well-nigh got me, too, with them needly little teeth of hers. This ain't in nature.'

Before Dr Huish's scorn snapped back at him like a rubber band, Lord Forfex asked Hopkins, 'But the dog's all right?'

'Nellie, m'lord? No, sir, I can't say she is; Nellie's acting up queer. Yes, Doctor, you can say "Oho"' and all that, but it's my opinion our sundew has poisoned my Nellie. No sir, not poppycock. A man can't help liking his little bit of a dog. And she's running a fever and acting peculiar.'

'And when was it you said the sundew attacked your dog?' asked Forfex.

'Two days ago, m'lord.'

'You're sure it didn't bite you?' asked Huish.

'Sir, you'd be hard put to it to get a pen-knife through the skin of my hand, let alone a tendril.'

'Hum. Well, Hopkins, we want a blood-specimen out of this dog of yours.'

'Will you have it now or will you wait till you get it, sir?' Hopkins asked.

Dr Huish shouted, 'Strike me blind, I'll have it now! Or blast my soul I'll have your cur chloroformed for rabies!'

Hopkins said, in his stolid fashion, 'Anybody that wants to put a needle in my Nellie will, I'm sorry to say, do so acrost a shotgun.'

'Spoken like an Englishman,' said Lord Forfex. 'But look here. I take it we have been feeding these plants Purine Complex *plus* Plasma 48, 2663141. Well, are there no guinea-pigs? No rats?'

'I prefer an intelligent dog.'

'Be reasonable,' said Lord Forfex. 'Calm, Dr Huish, calm. A man's dog is his own property, provided he pays the licence. My dear Hopkins, I beg you not to talk in terms of needles. All Dr Huish wants of your little dog is a few drops of blood, such as he might lose every other day, cutting a pad on a flint or getting scratched by a cat.

No more than that. The doctor wants no more of your Nellie's blood than might fill a five-shilling fountain-pen. Be reasonable, now. A needle is more humane than the claws of a tom-cat, or the bite of a rat.'

'Nellie was a fine ratter,' said Hopkins, 'and I never knew her get bit but once, when the rats was at the pine-apples – and then it was four against one.'

Lord Forfex said, 'Now nobody wants to bite your dog – only to take a spot of blood while she's feverish. To take bad blood away, if you follow me; not to put bad blood in. And furthermore, your Nellie may become quite a heroine. Statues may be erected to her. Consider Banting.'

'Ay,' Dr Huish growled. 'Would you rather have a dog, or diabetes?'

'Oh, do be quiet!' cried Lord Forfex.

'It ain't Nellie I'm so worried about,' said Hopkins. 'It's the plants. They ain't *right*. . . . Well, take a bit o' blood out o' Nellie, if that'll do good. Only let me 'old the old girl down with leather gloves, because she snapped at *me* this morning.'

'In twenty minutes,' said Dr Huish.

When the gardener was gone, Lord Forfex said, in a ruminative way that displeased Dr Huish, 'We gave that wretched Sundew the solution 2663141. 2663141 Complex.'

'Yes, yes; well?'

'We were to feed them a 1/100 solution, I think?'

'Yes. Sundew, Venus Fly Trap, pitchers?'

'Yes, and marigolds and anything else you like.

'With submission, Dr Huish, I don't like it,' said Lord Forfex. 'Hopkins's little terrier would have soon bitten her master as a flower. Something here doesn't make

rhyme or reason. . . . Wait a second! 2663141 Complex – hold hard, Huish – the genesis of that plasma. Better answer quick.'

Dr Huish said, 'As clean a case as ever I took a blood-test from. There was neither reasonable doubt nor tenable conjecture in that quarter.' He rubbed his hands. 'Stark raving mad, from a boy. The medievalists, no doubt, would have said that Matthew Taylor was "possessed". They would.'

'Did you say *Matthew Taylor*?' Lord Forfex cried.

'Aye. A complete psychotic,' said Dr Huish, with a sort of unholy relish. 'Consider, man! Sixteen proven murders in three years, each one a little different. A silk stocking today, a pair of scissors tomorrow, a wee lead pipe the day after; and the day after that, an electric heater in a girl's bath-tub. Etcetera. *Non compos mentis* in the clearest sense of the term, Forfex.'

'It depends upon what you mean by *compos mentis*. I believe that Taylor was in his right mind.'

'He was mad as a hatter,' said Dr Huish.

'Sir, I have read a little psychology,' said Lord Forfex, 'and observed a little more.' He had a persistent, monotonous kind of voice, coupled wth an aggravating coolness of manner, which matched the long lids that drooped over his colourless eyes. Dressed, as was his custom, like a knickerbockered professor out of a cartoon-strip, sucking a pipe which had cost several pounds once upon a time, but which he had neglectfully knocked and scraped into something disreputable, he nevertheless *whispered* Huish down.

'Dr Huish,' he said, 'allow me to observe that Matthew Taylor was in his right mind *only while he was committing*

his crimes. In Taylor, normality was insanity.'

'Let's have no metaphysics,' said Huish.

'Of course not. It's merely a matter of plain sense. If a man is born mad, his normal state is a state of mania. Your Matthew Taylor was at his most amenable and charming when devising or committing some atrocity. It was only when conscience, or remorse, or any of the civilised instincts came into his consciousness, that he foamed at the mouth. Tell me, Huish; when did you take his blood-samples?'

'When he was calm enough to hold, of course,' said Dr Huish, sullenly, 'when then?'

'That means to say, when Taylor was at his most homicidal.'

'And assuming I agree with you – then what?'

'We fed the 1/100 solution of his blood to the sundew, etcetera.'

'Pardon me, my lord,' said Dr Huish, sardonically, 'but being in charge of this experiment, I took the liberty of dispensing with your lordship's august permission, and dispensed a solution of 3/100.'

Lord Forfex said, in his peculiarly metronomic voice, 'Yes, but there are certain factors to be considered. I submit, Dr Huish, that your experiment was too daring. Have you considered the case? You are a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians; you *must* have regard for consequences, sir!'

'Oh, what the devil are you prattling about?'

'I'll tell you, and it is something more than prattle—'

'—Oh, stop talking like a confounded clock!'

Quite unperturbed, Lord Forfex went on, 'These greenhouses and hothouses have been in need of repair for a

number of years, since my father died. They are draughty, leaky, patched. Vermin get in; and what gets into a greenhouse – or any other house – generally finds a means of getting out, leaving some wreckage behind and carrying some ruin with it. Insects apart, my greenhouses have been infested with mice, and some rats too. Hopkins tells me that the rats have been at the mushrooms, for example. I maintain that since we are conducting a dangerous and delicate experiment, this experiment should be carried out in laboratory conditions. If I had my way, sir, I'd treat every greenhouse here as if it were an isolation-ward for smallpox!'

'Man, you exaggerate!'

'Dr Huish, I believe not. 2663141 Complex was designed to reproduce certain points of aberration in plants, so that these plants might be cured; and so that our grasp of the processes of mental disease might be rendered more powerful. Doctor, I fear you have overshot the mark. With all respect, you have not counted on one terrible factor.'

'Well, sir? And how so?' asked Dr Huish.

Lord Forfex replied, 'The factor is, that while one blithely assumes that a disease may be communicated by a man to a plant, one carelessly forgets that a disease may similarly be communicated by a plant to a man.'

Dr Huish said, 'Poppycock!'

'Hay-fever?' suggested Lord Forfex.

'An allergy,' said Dr Huish. 'In other words, certain pollens or fruits don't agree with certain people. I know a man to whom tomatoes are deadly poison, sir; and a woman in whom one strawberry will induce a rash like chicken-pox.'

'Asthma, now,' said Lord Forfex. 'Would you describe an asthmatic condition as pathological?'

'Naturally. And so is a black eye a pathological condition, if you like.'

'Yet there are some unfortunate people whom the presence of a chicken-feather will throw into a convulsion, I believe?'

'Come to your point, for God's sake, Forfex!' cried Huish.

'My point simply is that in feeding our plants with 2663141 Complex, it is possible that we may have set in motion a very deadly epidemic, Dr Huish. Consider the case of Hopkins's dog.'

'A snarling cur,' said Dr Huish.

'I have not looked into her genealogy, sir; and we might not come out so well if our ancestry were investigated. But a well-trained little dog and a useful one. As to snarling, Dr Huish, look to the beam in your own eye. Jack Hopkins's Nellie, having been "bitten" by our sundew, nourished on 2663141, has turned on her master.'

'This being the case, therefore, what the devil are we waiting for?' demanded Dr Huish. 'If the sundew has infected the animal, why, that's better than I expected. I'll take the blood sample. You and Jack Hopkins protect yourselves as you think fit. I'll see myself elsewhere if *I* do.'

Forfex said, 'You are likely to see yourself elsewhere if you don't, Dr Huish.'

'You, Forfex, are a botanist, we'll concede. But there are certain subjects about which you might just possibly be ignorant. Previously, in this conversation, you referred to smallpox. No doubt you are aware of vaccination? A

scrape of lymph from an infected beast produces the antibody that makes a human being immune; what time the vaccinated person, very lightly infected – if he *be* a trained observer – notes progress. Man! Do you not see? I'll be the Jenner of the Higher Centres. And, damn me, but I'll make a vaccine and introduce a Bill in Parliament, so that every child will have a jab! And mark my words; as smallpox was the scourge of the eighteenth century but scarcely exists now, so shall it be with insanity – functional disorders excluded – which is the scourge of our time.'

Lord Forfex said, with a sigh, 'No doubt you're right. But I'm not a bit afraid of a mad man; while I should be desperately frightened of a mad vegetable. One can police the world of men. But you would be hard put to it to put a Bureau of Investigation, or a Commissioner in Lunacy, over the movements of the grass. And I tell you, sir, that our experiments have gone somewhat far. I do not share your view that an organism, or principle, necessarily becomes amenable simply because it has worked its way through another organism. It is even on record, I believe, that certain trypanosomes, left alone in their hosts stay mild – but become savagely virulent when transferred through an intermediate insect host to fresh human blood—'

Dr Huish said, '–I'm grateful to you, *my* lord, for this lecture on elementary epidemiology.'

'Oh, please, Dr Huish! But if you consider, as a case in point, that *spirocheta pallida,* which was mildly endemic among the Caribs but, given fresh hosts, raged apocalyptically over the world for five hundred years—'

'—Enough of this. Come, we'll get the blood sample from that cur.'

Jack Hopkins's dog was one of those sly, soft-mouthed, ingratiating crossbreeds. They call them 'lurchers'. Such mongrels, bless their hearts, are curiously close to the mightiest mongrel of them all – man. While a bull terrier will depend upon his great strength, and a greyhound upon his speed, the type of Hopkins's lurcher Nellie survives – where others do not – by blatant cunning.

Jack Hopkins's Nellie was calm, and smiling – as dogs smile – while she lay at Hopkins's feet in his little sitting-room. When Nellie became aware of the approach of Dr Huish and Lord Forfex, she wagged her tail. The heavy leather gloves Lord Forfex wore did not disturb her in the least.

But when Nellie's master, Jack Hopkins, put out his hand to stroke his dog, saying, 'Ah, there now, that's a good girl for you—' she slashed at him upwards and sideways; and might have got her teeth home, only Hopkins was too quick for her. After that Nellie, as if nothing had happened, rolled over on her back, offering her stomach to be scratched.

Then Jack Hopkins, with tears on his cheeks, said, 'No sir, Dr Huish, this won't do. Oh dear me, and I had Nellie from a pup. . . .' He shook his head. 'Oh Lord, I can tell that sideways look in a dog's eyes. She's got to be dead, I'm afraid. . . . Lord Forfex, m'lord, could I have the loan of your .12 bore, and a couple of number-6 cartridges? Because Nellie was *my* dog, and I won't have her "put to sleep", as they say.'

Dr Huish said, 'Yes, yes, certainly, and quite right too.

But first of all, if you please, Mr Hopkins, I'll trouble you for that dog's blood test. Furthermore, I don't want the dog spoilt with a barrel or two of shot. Be reasonable, man, and let me do it my way. To wit: a few barbiturates in a saucer of sugared milk, all warm and comfortable, and then a whiff of chloroform?'

Hopkins said, 'The blood sample, or whatever you call it, I promised, and I stand by. As for the rest, sir, poor Nellie depended upon me for life, and she'll depend on old Jack Hopkins for her poor little death. She's gone mad, I'll agree. So do plenty others. They can't be shot – not so lucky! – but Nellie can be.' Unintentionally, in his unhappiness, Jack Hopkins made something like a witticism: 'Nellie has got to be shot to put me out of her misery.'

'I would also like that dog's brain,' said Dr Huish, falling into his persuasive tone. 'Come now, Hopkins, what's it to you? And I'll let you have a five-pound note. Or, do y'know, I have influence to have the dog confiscated in the public interest. Well?'

'You're the master here, I see,' said Hopkins.

'That's a comfort,' said Dr Huish. 'Keep her close, then, until this afternoon, after I've taken a few drops of blood and spinal fluid out of the poor beastie.'

The blood test being taken (and Nellie accepted the situation with a certain sidelong suavity), Dr Huish went out, quite pleased. Lord Forfex lingered for as long as it took to say, 'Oh, Hopkins, I have a favour to ask. Here's my key. Over the fireplace in the lodge you'll see three or four guns. Be so kind as to clean them for me. The cleaning-stuff is in the right-hand drawer of the desk. Here's the key to that. You may see a few boxes of cartridges

there – but they needn't concern you.'

Hopkins replied, 'I'll clean your guns, m'lord. And I've got a spade.'

'I feel for you, Hopkins.'

'I know you do, m'lord, and I appreciate it. . . .'

So there was a furtive excursion – Jack Hopkins with Nellie at his heels. Under one arm he carried an inlaid shotgun made by Purdey; over the other shoulder he carried a spade.

Out on the verge of the marshes, there was a reverberating sullen thump. An hour later Jack Hopkins returned with a spade which he heated in the stove before he put it back among his tools.

'I see that you are cleaning the .12 bore,' said Lord Forfex to Hopkins in the lodge.

'Yes, m'lord, she wanted a double clean.'

'Yes, the air rusts so. By the by, somebody been at the cartridges?'

'I dessay, m'lord.'

'There's a couple missing, I find. Well, never mind. How's Nellie?'

'For all I know, m'lord, she might be underground.'

Evening had fallen, and the indescribably melancholy mist of the marshes was enveloping Forfex when Dr Huish came thumping at the door of the lodge and shouting, in a tone peculiarly compounded of irritation and triumph, 'Hey there, Forfex! What d'you make of this, eh?' – and he held out a forefinger to which, hanging by its sharp little front teeth, was suspended a very small bat.

This animal was wrapped in its wings – it might have been hugging itself – and its weak jaws had scarcely enough power to push its incisors through the skin of

the doctor's finger. But still it hung on in a kind of ecstasy.

Jack Hopkins slapped the bat to the floor, and put an end to it with the toe of his boot, while Dr Huish shouted, 'I'll deal with you later, you ruffian! Meanwhile, scrape me up that bat. I want a tissue test, by G——!'

Jack Hopkins said, in something like a murmur, 'I think I begin to get it. The sundew, and so on, have a smell that all of a sudden attracts red-blooded animals, like my Nellie, and drives 'em mad. Oh yes, but your sundew, your Venus Fly Trap and your pitcher plant – they ain't infallible. Here and there a fly or two gets away. Bats eat flies. . . . Oh, for goodness sake, Dr Huish, if you're taking tests, take the first one on yourself! Because I firmly believe you've been bit by the madness that got old Nellie!'

'Whoever heard—' Dr Huish began.

But Lord Forfex stopped him short, saying with unusual vehemence, 'Your words in your teeth, Dr Huish! Would you rather have diabetes or a dog? Well, would you rather have madness or a mongrel? Classify, sir, and make up your mind! I warned you that our greenhouses were leaky, and that flies might come and go. I subscribe to what Hopkins says, doctor, and strongly recommend that, after the usual tests, you put yourself under close observation.'

Dr Huish said, 'Hopkins, get me a shovel and bring along the remains of that bat.'

Hopkins took a shovel from among the fire-irons on the hearth, scraped up the dead bat – and thrust it where the coals glowed reddest. Then, as Dr Huish looked on speechless, Hopkins thrust his booted foot into the fire for a few seconds and, after that, flamed the blade of the old brass

shovel, before he replied, 'No sir, God knows what you've let loose already.'

'The dog's brain!' cried Huish. 'Where's that dog? I want that dog's brain!'

'All the king's 'orses and all the king's men won't put that together again. It's in the Marshes, sir, and so's Nellie with half a bag of quicklime.'

'You're dismissed! Get out of here!'

But Lord Forfex said, 'Pardon me, doctor, but Hopkins was *my* employee. I am yours, and you have the right to dismiss me only. . . . But you're not looking well.'

'I've developed quite suddenly a splitting headache. It's the strain of working with the likes of you – or maybe I'm sickening for a cold. Who wouldn't in these damned marshes?'

'I'll get you some aspirin,' said Lord Forfex, 'and mix you a hot whisky toddy.'

Now Dr Huish was calmer than Forfex had ever seen him, almost jocular as he said, 'I'll take the toddy but it'll be codeine for a head like this, not aspirin. . . . And then I'll to bed, for I've had enough for one day.' He sucked his finger where the bat had bitten it, and emptied the steaming tumbler Lord Forfex placed before him. '. . . A migraine, common migraine,' he muttered.

But Lord Forfex said, 'Be angry at me if you must, Dr Huish, but mightn't there be something in what Jack Hopkins has suggested? That the poison, as it changes hosts, increases in virulence? If you go to bed and take some codeine, I'll take the liberty of sending Dr Maverick to sit with you.'

Dr Maverick was another assistant of Huish's, a researcher from Boston.

As he spoke, Lord Forfex instinctively fell back a pace or two, for he fully expected Dr Huish to fall into one of his terrifying attacks of black rage. But to his astonishment Huish replied, 'A very good idea, if what you surmise is only half-true. Yes, Maverick's a good man, and he writes shorthand; so tell him to bring his notebook, for if I have a seizure I'll talk all kinds of nonsense which we can afterwards integrate.' He rubbed his hands and chuckled, 'I had thought of injecting myself when the time was ripe – ah well, it's been done for me. Never mind the dog's brain. Who knows? When I need one, it might be simple and expedient for me to go and bite a dog myself. Tell Maverick to bring materials for a massive blood test, and to be ready to take a wee tap of my spinal fluid. If I should become in any way difficult, I am to be put in a straitjacket. But as long as I am *compos mentis* I'll describe my symptoms in the proper scientific terms. At last we reach the crux of our experiment. This may be poppycock. But on the other hand, it may not. But we are getting somewhere, and it is highly interesting. Good night.'

In a flash of something so like tenderness and so unlike Angus Huish, he turned to Hopkins and said, 'I'm sorry about your doggie, but I'll get you another. I was fond of dogs myself when I was a boy. . . .'

He went out, and Jack Hopkins, 'taking a liberty' for the first time in his life, said to Lord Forfex, 'Begging your pardon, m'lord, but could I have a drop o' that whisky? Somehow or other, my blood runs cold.'

'Help yourself, Hopkins, and give me some too. Pour, if you please – my hand is not altogether steady.'

After they had drunk, Hopkins asked, 'Begging your pardon, m'lord – but do our greenhouses belong to the nation?'

'Every stick and stone at Forfex belongs to the nation,' said Lord Forfex. 'The National Trust graciously allows me to live in my porter's lodge. I no longer own a blade of grass at Forfex. I have nothing but portable property. But why do you ask?'

Jack Hopkins touched his forelock and said, 'No offence, m'lord. M'lord, did your lordship happen to notice how the wind was this evening?'

'Steady nor'east by north. It'll blow up briskly tonight, I'm afraid; yes, it's blowing straight out to sea.'

'I only wanted to know, m'lord, because if it's going to blow up cold I'd better look to the lamps in my hothouses.'

'Well, you have the key to the oil.'

'Yes, m'lord; and while I'm about it I'd better take a few barrow-loads of hay and stuff up one or two chinks.'

'You always know best, Hopkins. Take what you want. Enter it in the book, of course.'

'Thank you, m'lord.' Jack Hopkins sucked at a cold pipe, and slapped his pockets. 'Could your lordship spare a few extra matches? I've run out, and some of them lamps might want lighting again.'

'Want any help?'

'I'd as lief do it my own way, m'lord, thanking you. And if I was you, if you'll excuse the liberty, I'd put on my hat and coat and take a nice stiff walk to the Forfex Arms; because your lordship do look a little bit peaky, and the air'll do you good.'

'I think I will, Hopkins, after I've seen Dr Maverick. Will you take a little more whisky before you go?'

'Thanking you, m'lord, I don't know but what I will. I *have* been a little bit upset today. . . . Good health, m'lord, and good night.'

So Lord Forfex took his old hazel walking-stick, and lit his pipe and, having had a word with Dr Maverick and another doctor named Macy, walked out to take a glass of ale at the Forfex Arms, which was a good six miles away. Jack Hopkins went to the shed where the inflammable oils were kept. . . .

Two hours later Lord Forfex, having arrived at the Forfex Arms – a decent public-house of which his forefathers had been landlords for several generations – sat in the bar and ordered a pint of old ale and some bread and cheese. He was aware that the countrymen pitied him; there were few of them who could not buy him out, now. The proprietor of the Forfex Arms had once been Head Porter up at the castle, and carried weight in the neighbourhood. The other customers, who all knew Forfex, pretended not to notice him.

He appreciated their delicacy, but enjoyed their presence. He found comfort in the tobacco smoke and gratitude in the evenness of their talk. Soon, one of his old gamekeepers – who, in 1940, had bought house property and got rich – said, 'That's a funny sunset!'

The publican, looking in the direction of the pointing finger, said, 'Funny? Funny? Why, Joe Madsen, when the sun sets in the south, call for anything you like, and I'll pay for it!'

But then a man called 'King' Bunter who dealt in 'chickens', some of whom had long speckled tails and others long furry ears, and who never moved without a low-built, yellow-eyed lurcher dog at his heels, shading his eyes cried, 'Sunset be damned! Forfex is ablaze, by crackey!'

'What's this?' said Lord Forfex, leaping up. 'Where's my stick?'

An odd-job man who, in the old days, would clean your drains for sixpence, drained his glass and said, 'Oy'll give 'ee a lift in moy new motorcar, m'lud.'

'What, is it you, Charlie Bottom?' asked Lord Forfex. 'Times have changed.'

'Ay, 'ave they! It's the gentleman walks and t'other roydes in 'is carriage naow.'

The host of the Forfex Arms said, 'Get along now with his lordship, Bottom, or I'll flat your jaw with a bung-starter!'

Apparently unruffled, Lord Forfex put some money on the bar, saying, 'Take it out of that, my friend.' Then he left with Bottom.

The old gamekeeper said, 'There's your real gentleman all over. No sir, that's not one to be shook.'

A smallholder who had made money selling building lots jeered, 'There's some here as could buy him twice over, him as keeps your lodge, Jack.'

'All right,' said the landlord, 'finish your ale and get out of my house, and come back when you've learned your manners.'

The old gamekeeper said, 'The fire's mainly to the south, and the wind's from the north. Then that'll be the greenhouses, surely – but whoever heard of greenhouses, or hothouses, catching alight? Unless that townee over-done it with the lamps?'

'Ah, that's about it,' an old market-gardener giggled. 'Townee overdone lamps in hothouses.'

An ex-coalheaver said, 'Oi delivered foive 'underd gallons of oil last Tuesday. Let the flames touch that, and

there'll be a bonfire like Bloody Mary, loike. Oi'll run over in moy Jaguar.'

But now the local constable arrived, perspiring, on his bicycle, and said, 'You'll run over nothing, Michael Frogg, unless so be you're so sharp you catch yourself coming round the corner. There's a blaze at Forfex that water won't put out – oil; and water only scatters it. Fire Brigade's drawn back, waiting reinforcements. Chain of buckets o' wet sand from Marsh is best we can do till then.'

'Is the castle afire?' asked the landlord of the Forfex Arms.

'No. Nor yet the other houses. But all the glasshouses is up in smoke.'

'I got my roights,' said the ex-coalheaver.

'And I've got my orders,' said the policeman. 'Now then! Stay where you are.' So they watched the distant fire from the roof of the Forfex Arms.

The heat sucked in the north wind, and then the houses of glass became incandescent, and melted. The moisture in the hothouses steamed away. A great, stinking cloud was blown over the Marshes and out to sea; and before the other fire brigade arrived with compressed carbon dioxide, the old Botanical Gardens of Forfex had ceased to exist, except as a charred and blasted wilderness bestrewn with curiously-shaped lumps of melted glass and metal.

And Dr Huish slept through it all, under the influence of strong sedatives, with a quiet smile, while Dr Maverick sat by with a blank notebook; for the old brain specialist did not say a word and scarcely moved a muscle, although he was generally an uneasy sleeper.

Jack Hopkins, smelling strongly of kerosene and nursing

a burnt hand, told Lord Forfex, 'Praise be for this!' – and produced the book – 'Here, your lordship, that's the entry: to lamps, seven hundred gallons of oil; to stuffing chinks, five bales hay. Signed J. Hopkins. I hope all's in order.'

'Seven hundred gallons? Five bales?' cried Lord Forfex. 'And praise be for what? And what's all in order? Are you drunk?'

'I had two whiskys last night, m'lord.'

'True, Hopkins; on my invitation.'

'Thank you, m'lord, and it done me good. . . . But you was away over at the Forfex Arms, having a glass of ale and a crust of bread and cheese, begging your lordship's pardon, and a bit of green tomato chutney. You know how these country people talk, m'lord? The fault is mine. I overdone the lamps. Not being used to it, the whisky must have went to my head. It could be I tipped over a twenty-gallon drum of oil, one place or another. It's all my fault—'

'—Tipped over seven hundred gallons of oil, accidentally, upon five bales of hay inadvertently scattered, you lying rascal?' shouted a familiar voice. And there stood Dr Angus Huish, beetle-browed and cantankerous; himself again.

Lord Forfex said, 'I am responsible, Dr Huish, for any act of any of my servants—'

'—Aye, I have no doubt you connived!'

Jack Hopkins, thrusting out his chin, said, 'I beg leave to resent that, sir. His lordship does not connive. *I* burnt down them bloody greenhouses of my own free will, and will plead guilty to it in any court in the land. So help me! Call a copper, sir, and give me in charge for arson. I'll get six months – and cheap at the price!'

Shaking his head sadly, but smiling at the same time in

a lop-sided way, Dr Huish said, 'Do not flatter yourself I'll make martyrs of you, ye fools. So, you burnt the hothouses and the greenhouses?'

'I did, sir, the wind being out to sea,' said Jack Hopkins.

'With, I may say, my tacit connivance,' said Lord Forfex.

Dr Huish said, 'Well, they wanted burning, those greenhouses. Let's be thankful for small mercies – my laboratory samples are still intact. But now I must away to Plymouth for plankton on the Gulf Stream. You born idiots! Had you not realized that there are more vegetables than there are fishes in the ocean? That all the life on earth, as you see it, depends upon the vegetable life in the waters? That, in effect, *all* flesh is grass? I forgive you, because you know not what you have done, damn your eyes! The spores and the seeds will be fifty miles out to sea by this time. Look for a red tide! I'm away to Plymouth. . . .'

Here, officially, the story of Dr Angus Huish is supposed to end. In point of fact I venture to doubt this.

It is true that the experiments that began at Forfex are, at present, conducted in hermetically sealed greenhouses, under the strictest laboratory conditions.

It is equally true that the Government ordered the destruction and burning of some sheep that went mad on the Sussex Downs.

That there has been a series of 'Red Tides' we have read in every newspaper. We know, also, that Dr Huish and his faithful assistants followed the huge swarm of microscopic vegetables generically known as plankton a certain distance along the Gulf Stream.

We know little more than this: that Lord Forfex is in

retirement; that Jack Hopkins is dead of a heart condition; and that Dr Angus Huish is at present confined in what is politely known as a 'sanatorium' in Harrow, near London.

Did Huish go mad by infection? Or was he mad before he started? That is a moot point. But, having access to whatever documents he asks for, he traces upon printed charts certain careful graphs: – it would appear that, following the Gulf Stream, there have been in Europe and America unpredictable outbreaks of juvenile delinquency and, coupled with bloody violence, adult irresponsibility.

It is believed that these are merely signs of the times. It is suggested that Dr Huish was, after all, not mentally competent – otherwise, why should he have made a murderous and unprovoked attack with a paper-knife upon a respected member of the British Medical Association?

We hope and trust that these are matters of coincidence, which those phytopharmacologists who are observing the effect of bad human blood upon vegetables may soon resolve.

Tamara Prolly

She was rechristened, or rather, she accidentally renamed herself at Ellis Island. Her original name sounded like something between a snarl and a hiccup, and was written Djna Ahuppaa, and her bones were made in Finland where the witches and the warlocks are supposed to come from.

When she came to New York she knew only a few words of English, which she had picked up in St Petersburg when they called that city Petrograd. Her great standby was, 'Tomorrow, probably', which she employed whenever foreign-speaking customers asked for credit, or said that their wives did not understand them. She pronounced it, *Tamara Prolly*.

And so it went down in her papers. 'Do you have work?' the official asked. She replied, 'Tamara, prolly.' Asked whether she suffered from any infectious diseases, she said, 'You want 'em, I got 'em.'

She had a curious knack of making people afraid: she could stare you out of countenance with eyes of such a character that you were uneasily forced to the belief that

if you happened to touch them, you would get an electric shock.

Her shape was cylindrical, and her hair was of the colour and texture of kapok fibre out of an army mattress. She had a most unnerving gift of dead stillness and silence. Also, she could become completely expressionless. And when she talked – which she could, very fluently, if she chose – Tamara Prolly adopted the ventriloquial deadpan and the false voice that comes from the diaphragm.

Her history was curious. She was always a strong girl: 'None of your fluffy ducks,' as she said to me once. Her people were poor peasants; they fished a little, and ploughed a little, but there was never quite enough to blunt the edge of hunger. Her father had rheumatism, her brother had been drafted into the army, and then the horse died of sheer lack of life, so Tamara harnessed herself to the plough.

She claims that she is at least as strong as a young horse. And a good cook, too: one had to be a good cook to make something out of next to nothing. New York never fails to bore her – 'a place where you see bundles of asparagus on the sidewalks, and melons and pineapples, for a few pennies? No sir!' she said. 'Where a baby is a problem, instead of a blessing? And marriage is a business like "Who walks in when I walk out?" Bah!'

I said, 'You seem to have done nicely here.'

'Sure. True. I got the restaurant. If only you could cook and wait at table, I might marry you. Then, at least, you would eat regularly. But you are a kind of gentleman, and I was not always a *restaurateuse* – no, I began as a common waitress, a little before your time. I threw out the boxer Kid McCoy! – and could do it again, because I can

carry my years. All the same, a girl gets old,' said Tamara. 'Have a cup of tea?'

Her personal teapot contained the liquor known as Icelandic Black Death, which is not dissimilar to Jersey Lightning: having distilled it, you bury it at the onset of winter, and dig it up a year later. The water in it has frozen hard; this you give to the pigs. The hard stuff, being pure alcohol, does not freeze – its effect is as if, walking downstairs, you have forgotten the last step.

Tamara mixed it with jam, and went on:

Even if I had not been kicked in the face by a nervous cow (said Tamara Prolly), I do not believe that I should have turned out to be a Marilyn Monroe. At the very best, the only public character I might have resembled is Mrs Jiggs in *Bringing Up Father*, only of a more sturdy build.

We had a cow, then; her name was Greta. As you know, a cow kicks sideways. I must have hurt her: I was only twelve then, and not so sensitive as I am now – today I could milk a hippopotamus and she wouldn't feel it.

As it was, I lay senseless for three days and woke up, as they told me, unmarriageable but otherwise unhurt. In fact, I was beaten for hurting Greta's feelings, and spoiling my chances in life – because, what can a poor girl do but get married?

Even so, believe me or believe me not, I have had my offers. . . . Anyway, when the good old horse dropped dead and my father passed on, what was I to do?

Having eaten the horse, and he lasted a whole winter, I had to look out for myself. My best friend couldn't say that I was anything like a Lollobrigida. But where does a girl with a hearty appetite eat, at least? Not as a servant:

the mistress feeds you scraps. Better work in a restaurant.

So I went to Maggy Borge's in Helsinki. There I learned cooking and how to wait at table, and did the work of three strong men, and ate for five. Once, for a bet, I ate a whole sturgeon; and then, for the bluff of it, complained, 'This was the fish course – where is the *entrée*?'

Oh, I could write a book if I wanted to, only I never learned to read or write until it was too late; and then only my name, *Tamara Prolly*, with a very thick nib.

So, like everybody else, I came here to New York, by way of St Petersburg. There, in Burdashki's Restaurant, I fell into bad company. Burdashki's was a meeting-place of thieves; therefore, it was a meeting-place of policemen and hired informers. There, the same as here, the restaurant was tolerated, because when the detectives wanted to cover up some larger operation, they knew exactly where to come for a little raid. Petty burglars, snatchers of women's handbags, little pickpockets, extortionists on a minor scale: they all came to Burdashki's.

And Burdashki was the most heartless informer of them all; in consideration of which he was permitted to conduct a business receiving stolen property and, later, have it returned for a certain sum. They called him 'Iudushka', which means Little Judas. But still they congregated there. Scratch a Russian and you will find a Lemming. You know what a Lemming is? It is the only animal that will commit suicide: every few years they rush into the sea and drown themselves.

You are surprised at my general knowledge? In my business, if you keep your eyes and ears open, you can get quite educated. . . . Burdashki's was what they call a 'Thieves'

Kitchen'; I don't mind thieves – they are sometimes quite generous.

They tipped me well, and I invented a new language which I borrowed from the gypsies at home. You know? A twig here, a stone there and a chalk-mark somewhere else, makes what is called a 'Patteran'. I did it with *hors d'œuvres*: bits of sausage, smoked fish, and so on, and so arranged that if you knew the code you could read my platter like a book and know how to conduct yourself – whether you should go out immediately or later, by the front or the back entrance.

And one push of a fork, and the pattern was destroyed forever. I ate the evidence anyway.

But some thief told his girl the secret of the code, and she must have talked; because one day a gangster (you remind me of him because of your puzzled expression) came in and asked for *hors d'œuvres* and vodka. When I served him, he rearranged the stuff on his plate, so that it said, in my code:

Get out of town before midnight and keep going, because somebody has squealed.

I can take a hint. I packed my bag with two camisoles, two smoked hams, two cucumbers, and was out by the ten o'clock train, with money in my pocket under my second petticoat.

So I came to America via Riga, and took a waitress's job in this very restaurant, with Monsieur Kadenec, who was about the meanest man in the whole world.

Yes sir, here, in the Restaurant Bretagne, a few blocks only from the old Hotel Brevoort! . . .

Anyone who has had a hard time of it is careful even with a potato; but Kadenec was famous for greediness,

even for a Breton. Only one thing I will say for him; he *could* cook, and he taught me a hundred recipes. But on our terrace, when they heard the screeching of brakes over on Fifth Avenue, they said that this was merely the outcry of the buffalo on the nickel when Kadenec was pinching it.

To him, I was like a buried treasure cast up by the sea. My duties were simple:

All I had to do was get up at five and scrub the place; at half past six, prepare the meat and vegetables; between seven and eight o'clock, do the linen and the ironing; at eight o'clock, put on a Breton peasant's costume and wait on table, having carefully washed myself; at nine-thirty, take off my Breton head-dress and help in the kitchen until eleven o'clock; and so back to the head-dress and the tables; later, wash the dishes and the glasses, sweep the floors, dilute the wine – interval for lunch . . .

And so on, until half past eleven at night, when I threw out those who were obstreperous and tidied up the place. Supper at midnight – Kadenec's idea being that, by that time, I might be too tired to eat – which was never the case. And so on around the clock. He who sleeps, eats; and vice versa – I lost no weight.

Now I noticed that every morning, at about a quarter past eight, there came to the Bretagne a gentlemanly kind of man who somehow reminded me of that thief who had changed my signals at Burdashki's.

Every inch a gentleman, he was dressed all in dark grey, and his linen was spotless, though frayed; and he had a tired, puzzled look on his face and a downy moustache. He was thin, and looked hungry. His breakfast was a cup of white coffee and a plain *croissant*.

At first, he put down the exact amount of his bill, leav-

ing no tip, and walked out. I knew that he was hungry, because I saw him pick up the crumbs one by one, and eat them; and I was sorry for him.

But one morning, he ate his poor little breakfast and then, when he may have thought I wasn't looking, got up and went off without paying at all! But it is little I miss, although I have small eyes.

Kadenec kept careful accounts. True, I was not rich: but what is a dime or so, if a person brings back to you certain memories?

In any case, I can cook the books as well as I can cook a chicken; and I believed that Kadenec was none the wiser. With a sigh, I said to myself, 'I'll never see that one again.'

Imagine my astonishment when he returned the following morning, as if nothing had happened, and ordered a white coffee and a *croissant*! . . . Now in Burdashki's, I learned several ways of seeing what was going on; one of the most reliable being to turn your back and catch the reflection of what you are looking at – not in a mirror, because that is too transparent – but in a pane of glass at the proper angle. In this way, you can have eyes in the back of your head. . . . He did not sneak, or lurch out; no. He did not actually put on his overcoat; he got it into place with a shrug, when he thought I wasn't looking. So I let him go on, morning after morning.

And every time, he felt at the knot of his necktie and looked defiant, frayed but nice (something like you). This went on for several weeks, until Kadenec called me aside.

He said, 'Now look here, Tamara. Don't think for a moment that I haven't been watching you. Yes, every move! What's the idea? Come clean, please.'

I said, 'Are the accounts in order?'

I said this to give myself time to think, because I used to be good at telling stories to my little brother when he was ill. . . . Only give me time to think, and I will make elaborations, invent, put in local colour, etcetera. Characters you cannot invent – try! Invent a cook, or a baker, or a butcher; in the end, he will be the whole, or at least a part, of what you have known: a person, a somebody, is there before you started – he is from God or the Devil. . . .

So I thought of that nice thief at Burdashki's; and I thought of the proud gentleman, who walked out without paying for his coffee; and I remembered a little of this, and some of that and the other, and I said to Kadenec:

'I believe that one is the Mysterious Gentleman.'

'And who the hell is this Mysterious Gentleman?' Kadenec asked.

'I am trying to tell you.'

'His coffee, and so forth, come out of your pocket; so I don't care who he is!' says Kadenec.

But I could see that he was interested, like a child. A child is always greedy for anything; and a greedy man is and his ears are bigger than his understanding. Give him always a bit of a child. His eyes are bigger than his belly, a puzzle, give him a mystery: it takes his fat mind off the facts of life – a bit of rag to suck, a dream on an empty stomach!

So I go on something like this:

'This Mysterious Gentleman: some ignorant people say he is the Wandering Jew, looking for Christian Charity; others say this and that and the other – such as, that he is trying to find pity before he finds salvation. But I know for a fact that he turned up in Paris, looking exactly like

our gentleman, and did exactly the same thing at the Café Suzanne.

'Wearing clothes just a little behind the times, you know? And always cold and aloof – never even nodded to the waiter; a true aristocrat – never paid. But it happened that the proprietor of this café was a kind-hearted man. Unlike you,' I said, 'he came from Lorraine.' Having expressed his feelings about people who had the misfortune to be born in Lorraine, this Breton asked:

'The bill, what about the bill?'

'What bill?' I said. 'What do you mean, bill? Oh, was it paid, is that what you mean?'

'What else?'

'Mr Richter, the Lorrainian, did not ask for payment, m'sieur Kadenec. Unlike you, he was a good-hearted man – and what's a few *sous*?'

'So? So he didn't get paid,' said Kadenec.

I said, 'There's nothing to sneer about. Only one little thing happened. After this nice man Richter allowed this dark, thin man to have his breakfast for nothing for three months, one day there drove up a fine carriage with beautiful black horses. Then out stepped the strange gentleman, beautifully dressed all in black. Even his pearl studs were black!

'And he handed to Richter an envelope and bowed, and departed. Richter opened the envelope, and in it were ten notes of a hundred thousand francs each—' I said '—a million!'

'A million francs isn't much,' said Kadenec.

I said, 'Not now; but then a franc was worth twenty-five cents. Richter got a quarter of a million dollars, just for being kind; and that was before income tax was invented.

If you don't believe me, you have two hands of five fingers – five and ten, put and take away! Yes, sir.'

'I'll believe it when I see it,' said Kadenec.

But I saw him counting on his fingers, and his eye was on the entrance. . . .

You are going to say that this was all a fairy-tale? So? What? True, I heard it from my mother, who heard it from her aunt.

Poor people comfort themselves with fairy-tales, the same way as men get drunk when they are sad. And believe me, the old tale is stronger than the *schnapps*! I saw my story working on Kadenec as you may see liquor working on a drunkard; only more so.

At last, he took a pencil and a bit of paper and worked it out that the Dark Gentleman owed me – *me*, mind you! – about twelve dollars. This, he said, I should have back, plus five more for myself. Anything extra was to be his.

I said, 'Oh, bah! The man reminds me of the good thief at Burdashki's; and what is a dime here or there in this country?'

If he had not rearranged those bits of sausage, they might have found me in the Neva River, I thought. *And for the sake of his memory, shall I spare a bit of bread?*

'It all adds up,' says Kadenec.

'Add up, and shut up,' I say.

But when the Dark Gentleman comes in, Kadenec shoves me aside, and behaves like a perfect little *maître d'hôtel*. It is:

'Coffee, m'sieur? At once! A *croissant*? But instantly! Oh, but please to try a tiny little bit of Strasbourg ham,

and a couple of eggs. *Des* fruits? It being a cold morning, a little tiny glass of Armagnac?'

My Dark Gentleman shrugged and nodded; and Kadenec personally came back with a loaded tray, and took himself off, counting again on his fingers.

I could not help laughing to myself at the success of my story; but like my poor great-aunt who, once she had made you laugh or cry with a story, had to go and make it complicated by explaining it and so spoil it, I didn't know when to stop. A little triumph goes to your head. To raise a laugh makes you drunk. A tear, more so. Greedy excitement, most of all.

And when you find that you have made a fool of somebody like Kadenec, you are in danger. I said to Kadenec:

'Don't let him see you, and he will disappear. You can watch him disappearing in the window. But m'sieur Kadenec – has it struck you that there might be more than one?'

'More than one of him?'

'Naturally,' I said. 'The world is a big place. I ask you, if you were in a position to do so, would you send out only one agent to cover territory from here to Paris, Paris to Helsinki, Helsinki to San Francisco, etcetera? There might be a chief agent, yes; but it would be against the laws of nature for him to be several times at once in different places.

'Consider Santa Claus,' I said, 'there is only one of him, but he leaves his gifts in a million different shoes and stockings at the same moment all over the world.'

'Bah!' was all Kadenec said. 'There is no Santa Claus.'

'You have disillusioned me,' I said, with a laugh. 'I have seen him – he used to leave a silver coin in my shoe, and

borrow it back to get drunk on next morning; he has a moustache and smells of spirits.'

'You are a foolish peasant!' says Kadenec.

But he goes away thinking. . . . Now, up till then, nobody dared to ask for credit from Kadenec; it would have been a waste of time. But from this moment, Kadenec became benevolent, as the saying goes.

It began with a few extra beans on a plate – he had counted them before – and went on to offering an extra helping, or a glass of wine. I think they call it 'psychosomatic' or something nowadays; but his whole attitude and appearance changed. He started to smile – which is the hardest thing of all when you are not used to it – and hit people on the back.

Whatever you asked for, he gave you something different. It was, 'Oh no, don't have that! There's something better for the same price, wine included.' I tell you, Kadenec became proverbial, downtown in New York.

It was to be noticed that he was always counting on his fingers, and adding up something with his lips. But he was such a jolly good fellow that he was generally considered as not quite in his right mind. Especially, he loved bums. If someone of the neighbourhood came to beg a cup of coffee, Kadenec would add a good sandwich and a glass of applejack, or 'Calvados' as he called it.

And every morning, regularly, my Dark Gentleman came in for his breakfast, and went away without attempting to pay. Once, Kadenec called in a boy to clean the stranger's boots for him; gave the boy a dime, too, when a nickel would have been enough, in those days.

And generally, after the place was closed, he would offer me titbits, and say, 'About this Dark Gentleman, my dear

Tamara: did he fancy anything in particular to eat or drink, do you remember? And his pals, what did they like?'

'Stew,' I would say.

'Ah, stew. Beef *à la mode*, perhaps? Or veal?'

'Either, but with plenty of bread.'

'Red wine with the beef, of course. But with my veal stew I serve a good pink Vin d'Anjou, or a white wine. . . . Did anybody leave behind, by any chance, a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*? Our Dark Gentleman always carries it, Tamara. How is the franc? To the dollar, I mean—'

'Steady, I suppose,' I say.

'Tamara,' says he, 'I don't know what I'd do without you. You've cheered me up. You've brought me luck. They say the Finns are sorcerers. Business has picked up, in *spite* of the fact that I have given away half the takings.'

'Or *because*,' say I. 'The simplest fisherman knows that one throws a sprat to catch a mackerel. A tight fist doesn't drop; but it can't pick up – as our old folks say.'

'Ah,' he must say, 'heavy purse and light head soon make heavy head and light purse.'

There is the trouble with your proverbs: they breed like lemmings until they run themselves into the sea. But Kadenec runs on:

'The Dark Gentleman, my dear, what about the Dark Gentleman?' – all the time counting on his fingers. . . .

'He'll settle accounts in good time,' I say, to soothe him.

You know how it is: you are not a liar by nature, and it is impossible to tell the truth, so you must make double-talk. At home we have two Dark Gentlemen – one brings

you, and the other fetches you away at three o'clock of a winter morning; both settle accounts in good time.

Kadenec says, 'You are a wonderful woman, and I don't know what I'd do without you. Marry me, confound it, in the American style! Here, the woman wears the trousers. Okay golldam, wear them!'

So I reply, 'I have not yet your waist measurement, Kadenec, but I will put a tuck in your pants . . . for the present.'

Thus, Kadenec and I get married. And a year later, my daughter was born. In honour of my native land, I christened her Suomi. Suomi Kadenec is not a bad name, I think?

He wanted to call her Suzette, like a pancake – but I put my foot down, and there is the mark in the floor to prove it! Suomi is at college now, studying drama; she has the looks I might have had if I hadn't been kicked in the face by a cow, and a much better address.

They want to enter her for the Women's Long-Distance Running Competition in the Olympic Games; only I think that coarsens a woman. A great actress, perhaps; but an athlete? – I could pick her up with one hand, big as she is, and throw her over my shoulder. . . . But this came later, of course.

From time to time, Kadenec made some reference to the Dark Gentleman. 'Tamara, you promised he would settle accounts,' he said.

'He will, he will,' said I.

I am no cheat, but just to keep him happy, I would tell him that the mysterious Dark Gentleman had occasionally left a ten-dollar piece in the saucer. I supplied it myself,

of course, because now I could afford it. But Kadenec started saying:

'To leave a coin like Santa Claus in a *sabot* (which means to say, a wooden shoe) or in a saucer – what's the difference?'

To which I replied, 'What?'

I am no liar, but it is imperative sometimes to pretend innocence.

Kadenec said, 'With 250,000 dollars I might start an hotel, if your Dark Gentleman makes some kind of a settlement. And he will, won't he?'

'Never let anybody down yet,' says I. 'But I wish you'd stop counting on your fingers and talking under your breath, because the doctors say that's the first sign of madness.'

'Oh, I'm not mad – I'm sensible. I'm making up my accounts; I mean to say, do I get meat for nothing? Do apples grow on trees? I have a little account in my head.'

To change the subject, I said, 'Look, in a week or so comes Christmas. As we say in the Old Country, a fish begins to stink from the head down. Don't do it! And at Christmastime, if you are good you will be happy and find something in your shoe. For once in your life, Kadenec, give a party. Be a man. We are ahead in profits. As my father used to say, "What is the use of the hook without the bait? Not even a cod will take a dry hook – but having taken a baited one, he is helpless; he is yours." '

I went on to say that, things being as they were, there were plenty of turkeys dirt cheap, and plenty of people to eat them; I said:

'Say, for instance, that there is a free Christmas dinner

for the first hundred and fifty clients to arrive by one o'clock?'

'Tamara, are you out of your mind?' says Kadenec, the veins in his neck coming up like cordage.

I say, '*In* it! In the first place, a hundred and fifty bums get a good Christmas dinner, a glass of wine included; and some of them go away blessing Kadenec, and saying, "The Christ-child has not passed my door". But over and above these blessed bums come the spenders. It is what they call in America "Public Relations". You will print numbered tickets, and that will do the trick. Don't worry, I can read figures, and I have my own system: give me ten fingers, and some bread crumbs, and I could show them a few tricks on Wall Street.'

'Let it be as you say,' says Kadenec, sighing.

And it was as I said. We gave away five hundred tickets for a hundred and fifty free dinners – first come, first served – and there was a line of people almost from here uptown to Times Square.

Kadenec tore his face with his fingernails when he saw the good turkey dinners going for nothing. But then, when the people who had been waiting, and smelling the gravy in the good cold air, came in to eat and drink for cash money, there was the greatest Christmas Kadenec ever had.

We closed only when there was nothing left to eat and drink; and to see him counting the takings I could have cried – he reminded me so much of my little brother Snorre, playing with little pebbles!

'But where was your Dark Gentleman?' he asks at last, when he has all the green paper and the silver in his pocket.

'Believe me, Kadenec, he always comes. In the end, he never fails to turn up,' say I.

Then Kadenec heaves a sigh as if he is lifting a sack of flour on his fat chest, and says, 'A hundred and fifty dinners! Do you realize that they cost me $62.95?' – always counting with his lips and his fingers.

I did not mind the dollars so much; it was the ninety-five cents that irritated me, so that I shouted:

'Why, you pig, you have made five hundred dollars profit today! And I have taken forty-nine dollars and thirty-five cents in tips—'

'—Hand it over,' says Kadenec, 'it goes into the common fund.'

Some devil must have come into me, because I took the money out of my pocket – all in silver – and dumped it into his lap, such little lap as he had, and said with a mysterious smile, 'Now, greedy, you will get nothing from the Dark Gentleman!'

Kadenec said, 'I don't want it! Take it back!' But I would not.

He got out a bottle of old Armagnac, and asked me to have a drink of it. I would not.

It was against my principles, and in any case I knew where to find it. But Kadenec, in my absence, got through the bottle.

Next morning – or I should say, early that afternoon – a woman who washes dishes woke me up and said that my husband would not move, and was blue in the face. He lived two months after that, all the time watching the terrace.

Poor old fellow, he had only his greed to cling to! But my Dark Gentleman did not appear, and Kadenec died. All the neighbourhood sent wreaths, and I had four carriages to his funeral. A mahogany casket with silver

handles, mind you, and a silver plate saying that he was taken from us only because the angels grew lonely, etcetera.

But as I rode in the first carriage with little Suomi – she always looked good in black, being blonde – we were halted to permit a grand new limousine cut in ahead of us at the Hudson River ferry. The bridges and tunnels were not built in those days. I looked around, not without irritation, and saw, in the front of the limousine, a chauffeur and a footman in black livery.

And who was sitting behind, with one hand on the handle of an ivory umbrella, and reading the *Wall Street Journal* with the other? My Dark Gentleman.

So we met for the last time. The policeman had more respect for him than for the dead, and let him go in advance, while poor Kadenec waited his turn . . . not that he was in any hurry.

My Dark Gentleman, although he brought prosperity to the place, never paid his bill. But I heard, later, that he never did pay any bill. He had a certain manner; nobody liked to ask him.

Call him a character in a fairy-tale, if you like. He is a Somebody on Broadway, or somewhere, real enough to the touch . . . and the word *touch* also has two meanings!

And so I own the restaurant.

But ever since then I do not give credit. . . .

Tamara Prolly sighed, and repeated, 'No, no more credit. . . . And no more fairy-tales, either. . . . Waiter! The gentleman's bill!'

The Wrong Side of Things

Before I learned to master my emotions and mask my feelings, as a child, and fell into fits of ungovernable rage, my father used to admonish me, 'Charles, you see the wrong side of things. If your pony threw you, do not beat the pony – blame yourself for not mastering it. Don't look as if you hate it. Hate is death. Hate digs its own grave. Hate is a dead end, my dear boy. Only love conquers in the end. . . .'

He could afford to talk in comfortable clichés, because he was free from all care, a prosperous gentleman in retirement, who liked everybody to be content; an unambitious dilettante, happy in his library, the most frequently opened book in which was his cheque book. There was no charitable cause to which he would not subscribe. I hate charities and all forms of benevolence – they impoverish the giver and degrade the taker.

But while he put all mankind in his debt, and made a virtue of it, my father always warned me against owing money to tradesmen and bankers, or borrowing it from

friends. The workings of such a conscience are incomprehensible to me; like the mysterious quirks of mind that enable certain 'thinkers' to reconcile Darwin with the Book of Genesis. *Neither a borrower nor a lender be*? Tell that to your banker, tell it to your company promoter, tell it to your Government itself! *Borrow on a promise and lend at interest on good security*, Polonius should have said.

As a child I would not allow another child to look at one of my picture-books or play with one of my toys unless he paid me in marbles or other small coin. I remember that I was given a stereoscope: I charged a farthing a look; and when I had a magic lantern I would not show it unless I had an audience of at least a dozen, and they had to pay a halfpenny a head. With money thus accumulated, I bought new slides for a change of programme.

What happened? Another boy was given a bigger magic lantern and let the whole countryside come and look free of charge, just for the fun of playing to an audience, and I was left with a box of slides on my hands. I approached this other boy and suggested a partnership. He said no, but I could have his lantern and slides for ten shillings. I bought at nine shillings. The following week a cinema came to town and my equipment was bankrupt stock, which I sold lock, stock and barrel for five shillings.

I was only ten years old then, but the bitterness of this fiasco left a taste in my mouth as of green mould on old pennies. I have never rid myself of that bad taste – the taste of defeat. To make it worse I had bought the lantern-slides on credit, and the tradesman threatened to ask my father for the money. So I stole some money from my father's desk. He found out, and forgave me – even

increased my pocket-money to keep me out of temptation's way – but with what a lecture! I swore never to be found out again.

It was the same at school. A local dealer was selling cricket-bats at fifteen shillings apiece. In London I had seen the same bats on sale for eleven-and-sixpence. So I ordered half a dozen, offered them at thirteen shillings, sold them, and cleared a profit of nine shillings. I was about to post the purchase price to the London dealer, when it came to my attention that there had broken out one of those devastating schoolboy passions for a new kind of cheap fishing-rod, the catalogue-price of which was eighteen shillings.

The village shopkeeper said they were unprocurable as yet, but he took me aside and said, 'Matter o' fact, I got a dozen o' they rods unpacked. You're a right smart young gentleman, now. I'll let you have 'em for nineteen shillings apiece, and I'll be a surprised man if you don't get rid of 'em for a pound.'

I had only five pounds, but he agreed to accept that as a down payment. I sold two of the rods at a pound each. Then, to my horror, that village shopkeeper filled his window with the same article at seventeen shillings and sixpence, the very next day!

When I protested he grinned and said, 'Ah, that'll pay a clever young gentleman like you for they cricket-bats, I reckon. I'll take the rods back at fifteen shillings apiece, and seeing as how you took and signed for 'em at nineteen shillings, that'll make forty-eight shillings you owe me.'

So I asked my first favour of Jack Havant, captain of the Fifth Form – again with that green, mouldy taste in my mouth.

Jack Havant was a big boy, wide-eyed and honest, fresh as an apple – the kind of athlete and moral hero one used to read about in schoolboys' stories – a serious scholar, a pitier of the weak. He reminded me of my father in his heartiness and his blond simplicity. Of course, I did not approach him for help directly: I had only to look morose and sorrowful after the fishing-rod affair, when the other boys shunned me and called me 'Shylock', and Jack Havant came at once to the rescue.

'What's the matter, Charles?' he asked. I told him, and he said, 'Poor old fellow! You must have been hard up to try and make a profit out of your friends – and a clever man like you, too! Won't your governor cough up?'

My father would indeed have paid that tradesman five times over, but I said no, my father would beat me, humiliate me and give me hell. I depicted that saintly old gull as a sort of fiend in human guise, and said that if it were not for one thing and another I'd run away to sea.

He said, 'Don't play on the wrong side, old boy. It never does to get off on the wrong foot—' then he stopped, blushing, remembering (I have not mentioned it before and will not mention it again) that I was born with one leg slightly shorter than the other and wear a surgical boot.

I knew I had him then. He said, 'My governor's a holy terror too. Liver, and all that – Africa and what-not, you know. But he's rolling in the dibs, and . . . Well, look here, I've still got my Easter fiver and a couple of pounds besides. I'll arrange everything for you with that old cheat in the village. Only try not to do it again, and not a word to a soul.'

He arranged this little matter, and thereafter – being made that way, I suppose – became at once my guardian

angel and my willing slave. I was his personal responsibility, his wayward brother. I spent one summer holiday with him at Havant Manor. There was a fantastic old place, if you have a taste for such things: for emerald green lawns, immemorial elms, ancestral oaks and a house of such antiquity that it was considered old when Henry VIII spent a week there nursing a sore leg.

This house was full of concealed panels and secret passages dating back to the fourteenth century. It pleased me to limp about this old place while Jack was playing tennis with the sprigs of the local gentry and his father was grousing in his den, paralysed with an attack of genteel gout. There was the Long Gallery with its ancestral portraits, and the library lined with fine old books, the latest of which had been printed in 1860. It was panelled in old oak. There was a huge stone fireplace, cold at this time of the year; and above it, in heavy gold inlaid in the stone these three lines:

that which i gained i lost
that which i saved i spent
that which i gave i have

This piece of arrogant humility irritated me beyond measure when I thought of the beastly egotism of these so-called 'givers'. It reminded me of *Honesty is the best Policy*. If you make a policy of honesty, you are in business and therefore dishonest; and if you give to have, you are taking, not giving, surely? Exasperated by those odiously shy little dotted *i*'s of personal pronouns, I climbed up on a chair and, motivated by pure malice, struck at them, all six in turn, each on its dot with the brass handle of a heavy poker.

Then something happened that terrified me. The massive stone fireplace seemed to groan. I felt a tremor that seemed to run through the house and, to the right of the fireplace one of the great panels fell ajar. I looked up again and saw that the dots on the *i*'s were now embedded below the surface of the inlay. Evidently these were six studs which, depressed in their right order, released an old spring that held fast a forgotten door.

I looked into the darkness thus exposed and saw stone steps leading down. But then I heard the tennis players coming in and I hastily shut the secret door; whereupon with soft clicks the studs sprang back into their original positions.

I had barely time to push my chair back where I had found it and pick up a book, when Jack Havant came in with a sun-burnt nose, shouting, 'Oh, here you are, Charles! Come and have tea. What are you doing all alone in this pokey old library?'

'Looking for secret passages,' I said.

'None in here, old fellow,' said he. 'The old house was mapped and charted for 'em long ago. Come down on the lawn.'

So I kept my discovery to myself, reasoning, 'Who knows? There may be something valuable hidden down there, and when I come back next visit I shall explore at my leisure.'

In due course, Havant and I went to Cambridge, and there we were known as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. He still befriended me. Lavish though my allowance was, I still got into debt in business ventures which, I swear, were water-tight, but always, by some wholly unpredictable turn

of luck, they went wrong at a critical moment, so that at last I found myself desperately pressed for a debt of a thousand pounds. Again, confound him, it was Jack Havant to the rescue.

He had come into his mother's money at the age of twenty-one and even without what was coming to him when old Sir Harry Havant died he had an independent fortune of fifty thousand pounds. You say that it was generous of him to give me that thousand pounds? I ask you, how? If you have a superfluous two shillings in your pocket, do you make a virtue of giving a beggar a half-penny, which is one-fiftieth part of it? Or if you have an unearned dollar, do you expect applause for giving away two cents?

Well, Havant saved me once more, saying, 'Don't fret about it, Charlie old thing. You can pay me when you come into your money – which I hope, for your father's sake, will be a long time yet.' Then he dismissed the matter with one of those imbecile jokes of his which always made me want to kill him on the spot, 'But at the moment, you see, your name ought to be *Havant*, and mine should be *Have*!' – and bellowed with laughter.

Our fathers died within a few weeks of each other. If he had not been a complete fool, my father would have left a quarter of a million. As it was, he left only a hundred and fifty thousand pounds. But Sir Harry Havant had been too irascible to look at a company promotor's prospectus and Jack inherited, therefore, four hundred thousand pounds and the Havant Estates – ten thousand acres of the best land in the Midlands, and several streets of houses in Belgravia and Mayfair. I went into the City, on the Stock Exchange. Havant went back to the country to manage, or

mismanage, his lands. But we met quite frequently and I constantly urged him to invest some of his idle capital.

It is a remarkable fact that, in spite of my steady record of last-minute financial failures, Jack Havant had an almost superstitious awe for my business acumen. Now at this period those in the know were convinced that rubber was risky, while copper was safe. So I induced Havant to invest twenty thousand pounds in Parang Rubber, while I privately bought heavily of Pargament Copper. Rubber boomed, copper fell. I advised Havant to sell while he had a hundred per cent profit, and invest the whole forty thousand in Pargament Copper; sold him my own almost worthless stock and put all the money into Parang Rubber, with a view to selling at a considerable profit when rubber went up only a few points more.

It went up. I held out for another point. Then came the black week-end of the great rubber slump, and I was twenty thousand pounds poorer. A few days later, copper soared, and Havant, saying that he was bored with the whole business, sold his holdings at a forty per cent profit three days before Pargament, which had been skilfully promoted, went down with a terrible crash.

Then, at a party, Havant and I both took a fancy to the same girl, a fragile little beauty named Lilly Milber. She interested me; it was rumoured that there was money in the family, and she did not look as if she had long to live. But Jack Havant fell romantically in love with her; he would. I had her financial rating looked into by an agency and found that she had only two hundred a year of her own, the money in the family being in the possession of a young and healthy aunt. So I did not propose to Lilly Milber because I was afraid that she might accept me; and

Havant did not propose to her for fear that she might reject him.

There ensued a comical scene in which, dabbing at my eyes with a handkerchief, I said to Havant, 'Take her, Jack. You will make her a better husband than I ever could. I'll work hard and try and forget . . .' He blubbered like a schoolboy, wiping his eyes on a cuff and stammering incoherent words of gratitude. I was best man at their wedding.

Three months later, the newspapers were full of the Havant tragedy. Lady Havant was travelling up to London when their train collided with the Northern Express. The young bride and her aunt were among the dead. The Milber Estate reverted to Sir John Havant – net personalty, 372,000 pounds, 17 shillings, and fourpence.

If this were not enough, certain other speculations of mine had, despite my most careful calculations, gone wrong. As the Americans say, I was 'in deep'. Not only was my private fortune gone, but I had committed the indiscretion of using some of my clients' money to the tune of 6,500 pounds. So I went to Jack Havant again, and told him an appropriate story.

He said, 'Charles, I owe you a deuce of a lot. I'll let you have the money. And look here; you say you're finished in the City. Come and stay with me. The Estate needs a man with your head for figures, and God knows you're the best friend I ever had and I'm horribly lonely since Lilly . . . Stay with me here, be my Estate Manager and take a thousand a year, or whatever you think proper.'

'I could work in the library,' I said. 'I always liked that library.'

'You shall work wherever and whenever you like, my dear Charles. I'm out all day, busy with the tenants. It takes

my mind off things. But it's the long evenings I dread. We can talk over the good old times after dinner.'

And so it came to pass. I had ample time, now, to explore that unknown passage behind the panel, the servants being strictly instructed that I was on no account to be disturbed unless I rang.

There were thirteen steep stone steps leading down into an arched passage. The walls were covered with moss, or lichens. My heart beat hard and I followed the beam of my torch. The old robber barons used to make such secret places to hide their loot, I thought. You may imagine my disappointment, after I had travelled no more than fifty yards, when my light stopped dead at a blank wall. But perhaps this wall itself sealed in some hidden treasure? I observed, indeed, a large quantity of hewn stone nearby, evidently left by the builders of the wall, many centuries ago.

Frustrated, I turned back, closed the secret door and returned to my desk. It would take dynamite to move that wall – and even so, who knew what immense weight it was supporting that might come down if it were disturbed?

Jack Havant came home, muddy but cheerful. Things were looking up on the land; five of his tenants had promised to pay something on account of rent five years overdue next rent day, if only he would drain them a few more meadows and install electric light. But there was the question of a deed. 'You like secret panels and things,' he said to me. 'I'll show you one.'

He pushed aside the portrait of some Elizabethan Havant, and pressed a fairly obvious indentation in the panel. It slid aside, uncovering a large built-in safe. 'My father's wheeze. He didn't like banks. Lost quite a packet

when the Bank of Britannia went broke in 1908, and always kept a whole load of the stuff on the premises ever since. Negotiable securities and cash, old fellow, to the tune of a couple of hundred thousand. All the rest in gilt-edged. The family jewels, too.'

'What!' I said. 'Are you letting all that money lie idle? It's a crime!'

'Oh, I don't know. I don't need the interest and the governor would have wanted it this way. And let me tell you it's a jolly fine safe. The combination spells out Havant in code-numbers. You wouldn't guess in a thousand years. See – the eighth letter of the alphabet is *H*. *A* is number one, *V* is twenty-two . . . *A* again, fourteen for *N*, twenty for *T*, and open she pops! Cunning, what?'

I said, 'Unbelievable!'

At dinner he offered me a penny for my thoughts. I did not tell him that I was thinking of the most inconspicuous way to get a sack or two of quick-drying cement and a few buckets of water and some tools into my passage by the fireplace.

But I was Estate Manager, and could do as I pleased in the house. I even grew gay over the port. Havant swore that he had never seen me in better spirits. Before the night was out, I had devised an air-tight scheme, to be put into effect on Rent Day, when all the servants were allowed to join the peasantry in an orgy of beef and beer and rustic dancing, and the house would be empty when Havant and I returned from accepting the usual promises in lieu of rent.

Now, as will become apparent, I really must be brief, even terse. As I planned, Havant and I came home in the later afternoon and sat in the library drinking cool ale. I

drew his attention to the motto over the fireplace. He explained in his ham-handed way what it meant – how the only thing that is written to your credit at long last is what you give away. Saying that I wanted to examine it more closely, I climbed on a chair. He did not see me press the first five buttons.

Saying, 'Feel this, Jack, it seems loose,' I let him press the sixth. And the door opened. He bellowed like a bull in his surprise and joy.

'Here's one they never found, Charlie my boy! What fun! Let's explore! I'll get a couple of hurricane-lamps!'

He did so. We went down. I let him lead the way. When he came to the blank wall, he said, 'Nothing, after all. Still, it was fun. . . . But I say, what's in those sacks?'

He bent to look closer and my knife went in scientifically under his left shoulder-blade. He straightened with a gasp, looked at me unbelievingly, and fell. I never thought so big a man could die so easily.

Then I went to work, always keeping an eye on his dead body. I worked like a madman. In spite of my game leg, I was always strong in the back, but the heat was suffocating and the stones were heavy.

At last Havant was blotted from sight and I paused to wipe my face. Everything had gone according to plan. I would leave him there, go back up the passage, close the secret door, empty the safe, leave the study locked behind me, go to bed and wait for the alarm.

And here would be a mystery to puzzle the police and put a few shillings into the pockets of the scribblers for the Sunday newspapers! Even if someone happened upon the secret of the passage months or years hence they would find my wall overgrown with moss – a dead end without a clue,

once I had removed the remains of my cement and buckets and tools. Then it was me – after a decent interval – me, for the wide Atlantic and the conquest of New York! With the last ounce of my strength I forced the last stone into position and turned to go.

I was stopped by a blank surface of ancient mossy stone.

I turned again, and saw the new surface of the wall I had made; and the shocking truth struck me like a blow to the heart.

For the last time I had started on the wrong side of things. I had walled Havant out, and myself in. . . .

. . . It is somehow fitting that I talk now, as I have lived – to myself and for myself, and never to be heard except by myself. It is also just that I have exhausted the last of my strength trying to tear down that which I have so painfully constructed.

The stones are too heavy for me now. The air grows heavy: even the hurricane-lamps are burning dim. The cement has hardened. My ponderous surgical boot is worn out with kicking. . . .

I have not the breath to cry for help, even if I would. I must have left a little aperture in the masonry, for sound comes through in a faraway overtone that penetrates the drumming in my ears.

The butler is shouting, 'Run for doctor! Sir John's still breathing!'

In spite of myself I must have tried to signal with the handle of my broken trowel, for somebody else is saying, 'Did I hear summat knocking? Where's little hobbledy-peg?'

Another: 'Oh, *he* can't run very far.'

'There's naught but a dead end here,' says the butler. 'Hurry.'

If I cried out and they could reach me in time, Jack Havant would forgive me – that would be his way. But I have been forgiven to death.

Footsteps die away.

This time I built too well.

A Problem in Curves

Vara, the demon tailor of Columbus Avenue, looked very closely at my old sports jacket, and said, 'My friend, do not worry if, when you are wearing this garment, the Broadway rabble mistake you for Emmett Kelly and ask for your autograph. Ignore them – you and I, we know craftsmanship.'

I said, 'I'm not worrying, Mr Vara. All I want you to do is put this button back where it belongs.'

'This I understand. Go into the cubicle and take off your trousers – don't argue with me, or you will make me nervous. With nicely pressed pants, in a jacket like this you could be mistaken for an eccentric millionaire.'

You waste breath if you argue with Vara. It is best to do as he says, when he feels disposed to talk. To keep you still he is not above snatching off your shoes, or sabotaging a seam.

'No common workingman could afford to be seen in such a jacket,' he said. 'But you know and I know that such sewing is not put into goods sold off the peg. It is the feel of the garment on the body that makes the look of its

wearer. Thus, well-bred but modest ladies wear next to the skin beautifully stitched things that they would die rather than reveal – you can tell by the expression on their faces. . . . Who made this coat?'

'Thackeray and Codd of Savile Row,' I said, 'in 1938.'

Vara nodded with an air of patronage. 'Good tailors, not bad. Ah, people like us would rather be knocked down by a craftsman than picked up by a cloak-and-suiter, eh? Now *I* completed my education under the great Schultz, also of Savile Row – and there was a man! He threw King Ferdinand of Bulgaria out of his shop for criticizing the set of a collar. He chucked the Emir of Afghanistan into the street for arguing about the hang of a coat. There was an artist, a master. I too might have been a Schultz – I have the temperament – only my wife wanted to go to America.

'She had seen William Hart in some picture-palace, and when a Yankee cousin told her that a smart tailor could make a quick buck in the Bronx, she saw me on a pony shooting Indians – she was thinking of bucking broncos. So here I am in my old age, buried alive in a sweatbox on Columbus Avenue in the middle of Manhattan, sewing on buttons, when I might be insulting the crowned heads of Europe. . . . What is this red stain on the lapel?'

I told him, 'Sauce from chicken *cacciatore*. Don't waste your time on it – it won't come out.'

Vara said with a sigh, 'I know. *Cacciatore* sauce, properly made, is a fast dye, and such is the nature of this delicious dish that it carries you away – you cannot enjoy it without, to a certain extent, sploshing it about. A bib should be worn with chicken *cacciatore*, as with steamed clams. Chicken *cacciatore* is one of the hundreds of things that have – alas! – almost but not quite broken up my home.

'One of my grateful customers, named Pepper, who lives round the corner near Central Park West, brought me some of his wife's cooking just to taste. I mentioned it at home one night, when there was meat loaf for supper, and for three years I did not hear the end of it. At last, taking pencil and paper – my wife being unable to interrupt, on account of a poultice on the gum – I said, "As I calculate, in three years of fifty-two weeks, you have given me 1,560 half-hours of Mrs Pepper's *cacciatore*. This makes 324 twenty-four hour days, or about 98 eight-hour days. That is, fourteen working weeks, full blast. *Woman, do you realize that you have nagged yourself out of a colour television set?*"

'The fact of the matter is that I, Vara, saved the Peppers' marriage and brought peace into the lives of two very nice people. . . .'

Then he went on:

. . . In the late summer of the year 1940, there came into this humble shop a very neat little lady, measuring about 35 – 23 – 36, tastefully dressed in a little black tailor-made suit, and carrying two large suitcases (said Vara). She was remarkably pretty; I cannot describe in what way – this I leave to you writers, you experts, who have to describe something by saying that it looks like something different. Sure, she had a whole second-hand jewellery shopful of semi-precious similes: hair like jet, eyes like onyx, skin like ivory, teeth like pearls, lips like coral, etcetera. Hah! Or, if you like, the grocery-shop kind of beauty: cheeks like cream, teeth like almonds, a voice like honey, eh? Live flesh and blood you cannot describe, what? Present company excepted, *tfoo* on writers!

Well, she puts her finger to her lips like they do now in television, and said, in a pleasant little accent, 'Do you do alterations to gentlemen's suits? *Confidentially*?'

I said, 'It says so on the sign, madam. I make no secret of it.'

'Yes, but can you alter some suits and swear never to say anything about it?'

'Did you steal the suits?'

'Oh no! They are my husband's.'

'Well, do you expect me to put in the papers an ad saying, Special Announcement! Vara of Columbus Ave. Has Just Patched Mr Shapiro's Pants?'

'My husband's name is not Shapiro, it is Robert Pepper. It may seem strange, but I want you to alter my husband's woollen suits and his winter overcoat, but I don't want him to know they have ever been touched.'

'Better sit down and have a cup of tea while I look at the goods,' I tell her. So she sits in the cubicle and has hot tea, while I open the cases and see what is inside. I shake out a jacket and say, 'He is quite a big fellow, your husband, eh? Chest 45, waist 47, hips 49, no?'

'And he is only thirty-three years old,' she says. 'Five years ago he looked something like Gary Cooper, only more refined. Now his friends call him the Avocado Pear; and it's mostly my fault.'

'How so, dear lady?' I ask. 'Perhaps you have made him too happy?'

'Yes and no. My grandfather was a Greek,' she goes on, breathlessly, 'and he was one of the chefs in the kitchens of the Sultan of Turkey, Abdul the Damned. My mother was an Italian, and she learned under Tolentino of the Hotel Quirinale in Rome. They both taught me to cook. I am a

very good cook, therefore, and I love cooking. I love to see people enjoying the food I prepare, and I love eating. But I love Bob much more. I would rather eat a nutburger with Bob than a *Pollo alla Romana Tolentino* with anyone else in the world.'

'Here is love indeed,' I say.

'Yes. When we were first married he had a good, healthy appetite, but little by little he took to eating the way some men take to drinking, and he keeps getting fatter and fatter. I am a person with a high metabolism rate – I read about it in a magazine – I burn up my food and do not put on weight however much I eat. But Bob seems to swell under my very eyes. Do not imagine that I love him any the less . . . but his *personality* is changing. It is because he is so sensitive. He used to be simple, open and frank. Now he is ashamed of his fatness. It is making him furtive, which is contrary to his nature.'

I say, 'This is bad.'

'Yes. He is afraid of my giving him what he calls "looks". So he eats in secret. He comes home smelling of liverwurst, which he tries to disguise with peppermint chewing-gum. This morning I found twelve candy-bar wrappers and an empty olive-jar in his sock-drawer. Last week I had to deliver a message to him at his workshop – he is an electronics engineer with his own business – and had to pretend not to see him hurriedly stuffing a pig's foot into his hip pocket.'

'Try stopping cooking such delicious meals for a while,' I suggested.

'I have tried, but the damage is done. Much as I enjoy, and need, rich food such as I have always been accustomed to, I serve only the most primitive fat-free, non-calorie

meals now. For his sake I go hungry too! And I think it affects my temper.'

'Oh, dear lady, believe me – better happiness with three chins than a clean-cut jawline and a sour puss! I know, I know!' Of course, she pays no attention to my wise words, but goes right on:

'So, he is unhappy and I am unhappy. It makes him so wretched to be fat – he feels that nobody can love a fat man. When he was in high school, he and his friends used to pinch fat boys and pour ink over them. He never used to think a comedian was funny unless he was fat. So I want you, if you please, to make all his winter clothes much smaller. They are a close fit as it is.'

'This, madam, I do not understand. Your husband is getting bigger, so you want his clothes smaller. Mrs Vara is good at feminine logic, but even she could not equal this.'

'I know. You see, now, when the weather is warm, Bob wears seersucker – he is away on a business trip, for a while. But soon he will put on his regular suits; he will find them miles too tight for him. Well, this might have a little, harmless shock-effect on him – I read about it in a magazine – and he will think he has got ever so much bigger than he really has. He will take it to heart, and reform. Things will be again as they used to be with us, beautiful, happy evening meals by candle-light, and there will be harmony in the house again. . . . Because, to tell you the truth, I have fallen into bad ways, too.

'When Bob is at business, I sometimes go to my sister's house and cook a *fricandeau*, and a little roast of lamb with a *piquant* sauce, or something. That way, I can look virtuous over the lean beef and undressed salad I serve at night, saying, like a hypocrite, that such a dinner is enough

for anybody. "Think of starving Europe," I say. And I daren't kiss him because I smell of the food he so dearly loves. . . . Please do as I ask.'

'Beautiful lady,' I say, 'it seems to me your plan has more holes in it than Gruyère cheese. Incidentally, to make such wholesale alterations to four suits and an overcoat will cost about sixty dollars—'

'—Oh, that doesn't matter.'

'In the second place, your husband will simply want his clothes let out again. You will be back where you started, and he will be doubly unhappy. First learn to throw a boomerang; then play with psychology.'

She makes an impatient noise. 'Leave all that to me. Give me your word.'

'All right,' I tell her, 'but on your head be it.'

'Thank you. I will make you a *Galantine Thermopylæ* for a cold luncheon.'

So I went to work and, in a few days, I had considerably reduced the measurements of Mr Pepper's clothes at all strategic points, without altering their basic shape. The pretty lady paid me and took the goods away.

Her *galantine*, I may say, was out of this world – I ate so heartily of it that I could not eat my dinner that night, and had to tell my wife that I was worried about business . . . with sixty secret dollars in my pocket. But my heart really misgave me, like the fellow says. The heart has its reasons of which the head knows nothing, as the saying goes. Still, what business was it of mine, this tummy of Mr Pepper's? I remembered having read in the paper about a man who weighed 580 pounds; he died of measles, and still life went on as usual.

Well, some weeks later when the weather turned to

autumn, one lunch hour a large man came into my shop in a lopsided, hangdog kind of manner, the way some men creep into saloons – 45 – 47 – 49 – I'd have known him at once, even if I had not recognized the suitcase he was carrying. He was, indeed, overweight.

It was not exactly that he was fat, but rather as if some half-skilled plasterer had tried to double the size of a normally proportioned body with wax, and left it in a warm place. His head seemed to have run into his neck, and his chest into his stomach; and so on. His face was not at all plump, but it looked untidy and uncomfortable – it appeared, let us say, as if he had slept in it, and his look was that of a man who is roughly shaken out of a peaceful dream by a process-server.

He put the cases on the counter, and said in a bass whisper, 'Can you do me a rush job and keep your mouth shut about it? I want you to let out an overcoat and four suits in strict confidence.'

Mrs Pepper had sworn me to secrecy, you remember. So, smelling complications, I was rough with him.

I said, 'Am I a gangster's plastic surgeon, or what? What do you mean, "mouth shut, strict confidence"? State your business openly or leave my establishment!'

'I'm sorry,' he said, offering me a cigar, 'only it's like this . . .'

And out comes a digest of *his* history. His name (as if I didn't know) is Robert Pepper (the very way he says it, all *B*'s and *P*'s, makes you feel fat around the mouth), and he is in the electronics business. He is married to, and in love with, one Helena Beatrice, the most beautiful woman and the most wonderful cook in the world.

In his youth, out in Idaho, he was content with meat

and potatoes – but his wife dug down to a layer of unsuspected taste-buds in his palate, he developed an ogrish appetite and got fat. His wife, he tells me, does not like fat men. He himself abhors them. He promised Helena Beatrice that he would eat only at home; but at regular intervals he is simply overwhelmed by something like a heroin addict's craving for extra-curricular food and has to rush, shaking, into the nearest diner or drugstore.

Knows he is doing wrong but can't help it; draws a pitiful picture of himself crying into a hero sandwich and afterwards sneaking to a prescription counter and asking the clerk in a shamed whisper if he has anything to take away the smell of boloney. . . .

'So you're fat,' I said. 'What do you want me to do about it? Give you a Turkish bath?'

'Well, no . . . it's like this: I put on one of my woollen suits this morning, and it's miles too small for me! It fitted just right in Spring. I'm ashamed to tell my wife, she won't give me hell but she'll just shrug her shoulders and give me a look. I'd rather have a skillet over the head than one of Bea's looks. It'd serve me right. Act like a pig, you look like a pig. . . .

'Now, as it happens, my wife is away for a few days visiting her sister at Cape May. You let these clothes out as much as you possibly can, and she won't notice that I've got all this much heavier. Call it a sneaky rat's trick, if you like; but all's fair in love. It's only to spare her feelings, actually; and I'm scared stiff she'll stop loving me. . . . Look!'

He put on a jacket, and he really did look so absurd that all he needed was a little hat to go on TV. I was sorry for the man; he was such a decent kind of fellow. 'You speak

of weight. How much weight have you put on – in pounds and ounces?'

'I don't know,' he said, blushing, 'I'm afraid to weigh myself.'

I wondered, then, would it be strictly ethical to accept him as a customer? But I thought of my own long-suffering wife, saved from melancholia only by a bi-weekly attack of hysterics, and of my youngest son so blessed with divine curiosity that he had only that morning taken the refrigerator to pieces to see where the cold came from.

'What the devil!' I thought. 'Are you here to mend marriages or patch pants?'

'All right,' I said, 'but it will cost you sixty dollars.'

'Fine! I have your solemn word? Scout's honour?'

'*My* honour, sir!'

So I unpicked my own stitches, and let those garments out to their utmost limits. Luckily, there was enough reverse cloth at the seams. And now when Pepper came again three days later, his clothes were noticeably too large for him.

'Bea will be delighted,' he said. 'She'll think I starved myself as a pleasant surprise for her, and she'll make chicken *cacciatore* the way her mother taught her. It's a dream – I'll bring you some in a bowl.'

'And that is that,' I said to myself when he was gone, 'or is it?'

It was not. . . .

Only a week later, while I was composing in my mind a letter to melt the heart of the income tax collector, the door opened, and in came Mr and Mrs Pepper together, and he was carrying the damned suitcase again. When in doubt, say as little as possible – I simply said, 'Hm?'

She was in front of him (there is no room for two people to stand side-by-side in this shop) and she caught my eye, while her lips framed an inaudible *Shush!* And he, behind her, had a finger to his lips and was winking and shaking his head like a Chinese idol. I kept still.

Mrs Pepper said, 'I believe you do alterations?'

'Ma'am, you have read my sign correctly.'

'My husband has been on a diet, and it seems that we must have his clothes taken in,' she said.

He said nervously, 'I can handle this, darling. Honey, why don't you get on with your shopping and I'll meet you—?'

'—It won't take a minute, honeyball,' said this unscrupulous little charmer.

Pretending to examine the overcoat and the three suits (he was wearing one of them now) I looked again at Pepper. His wife was gazing at him with such adoration that you expected her at any moment to throw herself flat on her face and put his foot on her head. I took my tape and ran it over him: he was still 45 – 47 – 49, but he *looked* different.

This difference, of course, was in his expression, and in the way he was holding himself. You have seen an insignificant and insecure man before and after getting a kind word from his boss? His weights and measurements are the same, but he looks bigger and better – he has sucked a kind of moral nourishment out of the atmosphere. So it was with Pepper.

When his wife made little *ptch-ptch!* kissing noises at him, I wriggled with embarrassment. Perhaps envy? The only such noises my wife ever directed at me were, let us say, kisses in reverse. I said, with an indifferent shrug, 'I

can take these garments in. It will cost you sixty dollars.'

She nodded. If joy can make even a homely woman beautiful, you can imagine what it did to her! . . . Oh well, they left, each with a secret look towards me; and I put the garments back exactly as they had been when they first came into my hands – 45 – 47 – 49.

Pepper came to collect them. 'No more of this monkey business,' I told him, 'the seams will not stand any more tampering with.'

'Everything is fine, now,' he said, and offered me ten dollars extra.

I refused it. 'Send me your cleaning,' I said, 'and remember me when you need new suits. I will make them with three inches of spare seam. . . . And, when you think of it, bring me further samples of your wife's cooking.' So I became their valet, as you might say. I cleaned and pressed his suits – which I was sick of the sight of – and her suits, also, to which I devoted special care and attention. . . . She used a disturbing brand of perfume.

With every order came a piece of pie, a little chicken in aspic or some other delicacy, so that I began to feel almost like one of the family. And thus a year passed.

Then came Pearl Harbour; and a certain rainy afternoon when Mrs Pepper came into the shop, white with shock but shining with pride.

'Mr Vara!' she cried, 'Bob has gone!'

'Gone where?'

She told me that the Army wanted technicians of Bob Pepper's kind, and that, not wishing to worry her unnecessarily, he had volunteered 'without a word to me, even! And he was so excited,' she said, 'he hardly kissed me goodbye!'

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'War is more exciting than love,' I said. 'At first.'

'I dread the long evenings, the empty table, the empty rooms, the loneliness. . . . There is nothing for me to do at Bob's shop; it's all technical. And we were so bound up in each other we didn't make many friends. I haven't very much to say, really, without Bob.'

'Well, well, when you are lonely come and talk to me.'

'Perhaps you will come and have dinner with me sometime?' she suggested.

By way of a joke I said, 'I would not like to compromise you in the eyes of the neighbours, dear lady.'

She cried out, 'Oh, surely, Mr Vara, you don't imagine that I'd invite to my house anybody who might for one moment compromise me even in the eyes of the greatest mischief-maker in the world? I mean, I sometimes invite the janitor in for a glass of milk and a sandwich, and he is sixty-nine and has asthma and a goitre. Don't worry about appearances, Mr Vara. Bob and I regard you as a kind of Character – like Hugh Herbert, only not crazy, but eccentric. It's just that I don't like cooking for women, and you are the most harmless man I can think of.'

I have been described as a leprechaun, a gnome, a little monster and (by my wife) as an Egyptian mummy; but never as a *harmless* man. My feelings were a little hurt.

I did not accept Mrs Pepper's invitation to dinner, and began, in fact, to look at her with a slightly more critical eye. It seemed to me that her contours were not quite so clean-cut as I had first thought; I detected a certain blurring of her delightful profile and – was it illusion? – a certain tendency to softness under the chin.

But it was not illusion. Her husband had been gone nearly a year when she came here with a suitcase and said,

with tears in her beautiful eyes, 'Mr Vara, you must alter some of *my* suits! I am putting on weight.'

And so she was. She explained that she could not cook for herself alone, and sit down at a table laid for one; so she cooked for an imaginary couple, and ate Bob Pepper's dinner too. Loneliness, she said, seemed to have sharpened her appetite. She messed about with rich sauces like an alchemist – she wanted her Bob to have something extra-special to come home to. There is always an excuse.

I said, 'Cook half-portions and take more exercise.'

'No, I don't like to go out in case there's a message; and I'm not much of a reader – cooking occupies my mind.'

I measured her: now she was 36 – 28 – 37½.

'Let it stop here,' I said, sternly, 'there is a limit to the overlap of a seam.'

But I knew that when your Mediterranean-type woman starts to get fat, nothing but a famine will stop her.

'Your stuff will be done in a fortnight,' I said. 'I am packed with orders, top priority.' I was delaying delivery because this lady had succeeded in irritating me; I would give her a taste of her own 'shock treatment'. A harmless man, was I? Ha!

And I, Vara, had thought this woman beautiful. My friend, there is no such thing as 'beautiful but dumb': human flesh without the animation of intelligence is like a stove without fire. Harmless, eh? Instead of letting her suits out at the seams, I took them in just a little.

Naturally, she put on a couple of pounds in two weeks, so when she tried a jacket which I had made smaller, she felt like one of those rubber ducks that children swim on.

'I will not touch these goods again,' I said. The grief

in her eyes almost melted my heart; but then she sighed and said:

'Oh well, I'll make up all my suits into a Bundle for Britain and wear print dresses – that way I help the war effort – and really, with my husband abroad, this is no time to go about in $150 suits from Blackadder's, you know. . . . And anyway, I think I'll look better in print, now.' There was no argument. She did as she said. . . .

And more time passed. Then the War Department released the story of the Omala Atoll in the South Pacific, and the whole world rang with the tale of Top-Sergeant Bob Pepper; and rightly so, because my good friend was a hero! Everybody knows that story – except the young, in whose vocabulary now Bob Pepper would be only a square daddy-oh.

Pepper, with four other men, was put on Omala to set up and operate a little observation post and radio station, which they established in a hidden cave where there was a spring of drinkable water. The atoll was otherwise uninhabited. One day a Japanese fighter-bomber, crippled in battle and blown off its course, tried to crash-land on Omala. It overshot its mark and crashed in the lagoon. But first, the pilot jettisoned his bombs. As luck would have it, one of them exploded at the mouth of the cave, killing four of our men, wounding Pepper and smashing the little radio station.

Pepper bandaged himself as best he could, buried his friends and tried to repair the delicate machinery. But certain vital parts were missing – I am ignorant of the technicalities – and Pepper remembered that aircraft also carry radio equipment. But the Japanese plane was in fifteen feet of water, and this water was alive with sharks.

He had been a great swimmer in his youth, on the banks of Snake River in Idaho; so he said some prayers, and took a combat knife and some tools, and plunged in. After weeks of work, and more than four hundred desperate dives, he got from the sunken plane most of what he needed, and settled down with frenzied patience to mend his ruined apparatus. This took many more weeks, and his food supplies were running low – in the hurly-burly of the war in the Pacific, it seemed that the Omala Atoll was forgotten.

One night a Japanese submarine came into the lagoon, damaged by depth-charges and putting in for emergency repairs. Within a stone's throw of the enemy Pepper began, unsuspected at first, to send messages in code. Then he was discovered, but he got away. Pepper knew the atoll, and the enemy did not. At last they starved him out of hiding; but just then our planes arrived – one of his messages had got through – and the submarine was captured.

So Bob Pepper came home, shot to rags like a battle-banner, and covered with medals and glory . . . and interestingly lean.

The magazines bid high for *The Sergeant Pepper Story,* and a Hollywood company paid $120,000 for the motion-picture rights, even before he arrived. His wife came to see me, twisting her handkerchief with nerves.

'All the girls will be after him now,' she said, 'and I'm fat. Oh Mr Vara, will he still love me?'

I said, 'I am only a "harmless" tailor – what do I know? You can't measure love with a tape. Stories are only words, movies are only shadows; girls become women, and heroes are forgotten, or else we should all be remembered one way or another. Love wears best. Be calm. Fame and

money never spoiled a proper man – which Bob must be if he can fight alone.'

. . . Soon, Bob Pepper came to me with the same old suits, and asked me to take them in. Now, having recovered, he measured 40 – 38 – 39 – a good, solid figure of a man.

'Better let me make you new suits,' I said. 'I am tired of handling this stuff.'

'Oh, there's plenty of wear in them yet,' he said.

He did not need to add that, with the income from his business, etcetera, his earnings for that first post-war year would be assessed at about $160,000, and that by the time the tax-collectors were through with him, he would remember Omala with something like fond regret. I knew why riches, even more than danger, had turned Bob Pepper into a careful fellow.

'Hm!' I said. 'And how is Mrs Pepper?'

'Fine! . . . You know, women are funny. Years ago, she was afraid to let me out of her sight in case I'd eat too much. Now, she's scared to turn her back in case I don't eat enough!'

'Does she cook as well as ever?'

'If possible, better,' Pepper said.

I said, 'Ha! Very well, I will take these suits in for you now. Next year I will make you new suits.'

'Yes, maybe.'

'There will be no maybe,' I told him. 'Is your appetite okay?'

'Terrific!'

'Good. In a little while I will send you patterns,' I said.

Mr Vara handed me my trousers and jacket.

'Well?' I asked.

'Well, what? Oh yes. . . . The following January I sent Pepper some patterns, and he ordered six suits. He was back to 45 – 47 – 49, with a promise of expansion. I made these suits with a three-inch overlay at every seam. It was inevitable.

'She was vain; when she was slim she wanted her husband to be the same, so that other women might envy her. And she was jealous; she had not bargained for a hero as a husband – a woman never sees a hero as a fat man – so she, having got plump, had to fatten him again in order to feel secure. I let out their seams, little by little, at the rate of about an inch a year.

'I saw them last Sunday in the park. She is still remarkably pretty, and he is massive and contented. In 1960 I shall make him some more suits. They are the most comfortable-looking couple in town, and I see no reason why they should not live happily ever after.

'. . . But I am not quite sure whether the love of such a dangerous woman is something to be altogether thankful for,' said Mr Vara.

The Oracle of the Fish

Exhausted by a fruitless argument in the bar of the Dog and Sword, in one of those Welsh valleys that seem to be set out like bowls to catch and curdle the mist in some celestial dairy, I went to my room, pretending that I had to write a letter. I was irritated: it seemed to me unreasonable that a village of seventy inhabitants should have a name of twenty-three syllables, so that the signboard was three times longer than the railway platform. The Welsh are a choleric people; touchy, like all persistent minorities, and when moved they raise their voices. I had only said that the Ministry of Transport was right, for once, to abbreviate something like *LLANFARPWYLLNNPWLL-GOLLYODDFFARGOGOGOCH* – it is possible that I misquote – into *L.L.G.*

I was lucky to get to my room alive, pursued by the haunting voice of an irate shepherd who called me a *Pillgolliwog*, which is as near as I can get to the phonetics of it. Soon I heard the light but firm footsteps of the landlady coming upstairs. She knocked at my door and, on my

invitation, came in with a visiting-card. Like most of the north Welsh she seemed to have just a little more of blood, vitality and the breath of life than her skin was made to contain. 'Now what's the matter?' I asked.

She replied, 'That is what they all want to know, look; they are good men, see, except never mind who. A soul so dead breathes there a man with, who never to himself has said? But I must get back, look, to my bar; only the gentleman said give you his card because he likes, if you please, your conversation; so now then, here it is, look.'

Taking the card, I said, 'I didn't get a word in edge-ways.'

'Ah, we like to make a scholar and a gentleman feel at home, look.' The card read:

GRUFFYDD GRUFFYDD

When I asked, 'And what the devil is this?' – she said, 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain! There, goodness me, I forget it is not your fault you were born on the wrong side of the border – save me from the sin of vanity – so how could you know, sir, the Welsh language is spelt just like it's pronounced? *U* is spoken *ee*, *dd* naturally is pronounced *th*, so this is "Griffith Griffith", for goodness sake – ah, the Welsh is spoken just like it is written down and always to the point, look!'

'And who is Gruffydd Gruffydd,' I asked, 'and what does he want?'

'But good, hard working men they are, and fine singers, and the Chapel never empty, not like those heathens in the Rhondda Valley, my goodness no; and their wives so clean you could eat fried eggs off their bare backs,' she said.

'I don't want to eat fried eggs off their bare backs—'

'—No, don't! I have for your supper a lovely mutton

pie. . . . Ah, Dr Gruffydd Gruffydd is a learned man and his name has been in print, though touched in the head and a screw loose; he lives in the Old Priory where Merlin's Pool is – they are sensible people round here, look, but ignorant as dirt with their superstition, so they say the Old Priory is haunted. I am a reasonable woman, thank goodness, and do not believe in such claptrap, but I would not set foot in that place after dark for a diamond bracelet wrapped in a fifty-pound note. . . . Ah, there they go, them downstairs, banging my bar with their cans; fine, sober men, look you, only they'd sell their shirts for a pint. . . .

'So Dr Gruffydd Gruffydd has ordered up a gallon of my Special Old Ale to drink in privacy with you away from what he calls the *hoi polloi* – strong in his language he is, with his foreign talk: muck-brained oofs they may be but not *polloi*, and honest as the day is long, only the day is done, look, and I must get down before some of them strip the house to the bone. It is not that I distrust them—' here she slapped a jingling pocket under her petticoat '—but to be on the safe side, not to lead them into temptation, I always empty the till every time I leave the bar. . . . Ah, Dr Gruffydd, here is the gentleman from England all agog!'

A deep, imperious voice said, 'If you do not get your elephantine behind out of the doorway, woman, I'll pinch it.'

She made way with a curious noise compounded of a giggle and a shriek. The other voice should have belonged to a giant, but the man who now came into my room, carrying an immense jug and two shining tankards, was not much more than five feet tall. He was one of those

indestructible little men who always remind me of suspension bridges: all wire, wonderfully balanced to make light of colossal weights and absorb incredible vibrations.

I had met his like only once before, in the person of that fabulous flyweight boxer Jimmy Wilde, also a Welshman, whom we used to call the Ghost With A Hammer In His Hand, and who, weighing ninety-eight pounds, would undertake to fight any man toe-to-toe on a pocket handkerchief and come out the winner without a bruise, only this man was grey-headed, voluble and fine-drawn.

His hair had a steely appearance and his eyebrows looked like those little wire brushes that one uses to clean suede shoes. Even his eyes, bright grey, protuberant and very steady, put me in mind of rivets holding together, at high tension, a wiry complexity of wrinkles and the buttress of his pyramidal nose. Everything about his face seemed necessary, irreplaceable: if you pulled out a single line, you would disturb a vital congruence. He was so much at home that I could only say, 'Dr Gruffydd? How do you do?'

'Happy to meet you, sir; I am acquainted with your work – it is full of imagination, a rare quality, sir. The people hereabouts think they are imaginative: sir, they have corrugated-iron heads covering boxes of echoes like their tin chapels. I was glad to see that you did not allow yourself to be drawn into an argument with those four-ale swillers below; they know nothing. Have some proper ale; the landlady brews it especially for me. We are a law-abiding people, but—!

'And please do not call me doctor; I made it clear, when I came here from Llanwnda fifteen years ago, that I am a doctor of philosophy, Oxford, and not a doctor of medi-

cine, yet not a week passes but some muddied lout wakes me up in the middle of the night to deliver his child or set his broken leg. Drink up! Down with superstition!' The ale was like a field of ripe barley on a hot day in late summer.

I asked, 'In what did you specialize for your doctorate?'

'History, and so to archaeology and what I may call kindred subjects. . . . What's that you are reading?' He pointed to an open book on my table.

I said, 'I brought no books with me, and the only ones in the Dog and Sword are a Bible in Welsh and an odd volume of 'The Badminton Library' devoted to fishing, so I passed the time away with that.'

Gruffydd Gruffydd said, 'Although we Welsh are among the earliest begetters of the world's earliest begetters of the world's arts and letters, we are quite an illiterate people. Most of our poetry is spontaneous: it comes by word of mouth, and then it generally takes the form of wild boasting. If you had stayed downstairs half an hour longer, you would have heard every ploughboy laying wild claim to extraordinary ancestry. A well-born Welshman never mentions these things – I don't! . . .

'And I happen, quite incidentally, to be descended from practically all the Independent Princes since A.D. 844, beginning with Rhodri the Great and Anarawd, the son of Rhodri, and so on through Hywel Dda the Good, Hywel ab Ieuaf the Bad, and Cadwallon his brother, and Maredudd ab Owain ap Hywel Dda who lasted from 986 A.D. to 999 which was not at all bad, considering; Cynan ap Hywel ab Ieuaf, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn ap Seisyll, Bleddyn ap Cynfyn, Gruffydd ap Cynan ab Iago, and thus via Llywelyn ap Gruffydd ap Llywelyn through obvious

degrees to Gruffydd ab Gwynedd ap Gruffydd; hence, Dafydd ap Gruffydd the Rock-Crusher, and so your humble servant directly descended from King Llywelyn ap Gruffydd ap Llywelyn who died in 1282, game to the last!

'But a gentleman does not mention such things. What would you think of me if I said to you that my ancestors were kings when yours were herding swine and floating about in coracles, and painting themselves blue with woad? You would deplore my lack of manners, yet such happens to be the case; I am sorry but there it is, democrat that I am and the avowed enemy of all forms of snobbery.

'A man cannot help it if he is born an aristocrat, only he can refrain from talking about it. Good God, compared with my grandfathers, Glendwyr himself was a pup, but do I chatter about it over a pot of beer?' All the time he was pacing restlessly, up and down, idly thumbing that volume of "The Badminton Library".

Suddenly stopping short, he pointed to a passage, which was as follows:

. . . To the trout of Carraclwddy pools, near Rhayader, has been attributed the singular propensity of croaking – indeed, the croaking trout of Carraclwddy pools are regarded as amongst the local celebrities. A writer who visited the pools some years ago as an investigator says: 'When first taken, and even after they have been in the basket for some time, they do decidedly utter a peculiar croak, which the natives attribute to their having been bewitched by the monks of Strataflorida Abbey; others again assert that it is an attempt to speak Welsh . . .

He read this aloud with a derisive laugh and said, 'A perfect example of superstitious poppycock that is swallowed hook, line and sinker by fishermen, but something about fishing does bring out the liar in the best of men, mind you. I have seen a man hook a two-pound eel which broke the line and got away, and with these ears I have heard him the same evening talk himself and his audience into mass hysterics as if he had hooked Behemoth. Besides, the fish is in his own element, you fight him on his own ground; allow, also, for the fact that water is a magnifying glass. But a talking *trout!*

'Never forget that your Carraclwddy fisherman would endanger his immortal soul for a five-shilling tip, and in Rhayader no doubt they get a rake-off for confirming this flap-bang. I'm a Llanwnda man myself and free from prejudice but – upon my honour! – a Carraclwddy trout talking Welsh? That is a bit thick. You don't believe it, do you?'

I said, 'Of course not.'

'And quite right too! Reason is against it: the monks of Strataflorida never bewitched trout. No, no, it is not a trout, it is a carp!'

Gruffydd Gruffydd put forward the forefinger of his right hand which was adorned with a most remarkable ring, of pale gold, evidently of great antiquity because the metal was pocked and scarred by processes beyond the scope and the patience of modern art and science, its oval face about an inch long and three quarters of an inch at its widest enamelled in a curious circular pattern – or, perhaps, I should say a series of vertical patterns – in a most brilliant and beautiful blue. In the vortices of the design there was something of optical illusion: draw a

spiral, shut your eyes and then look again, and tell whether it is sucking down or writhing up; such was the effect of this pattern.

Gruffydd Gruffydd said, 'You have never seen the like of this before, and may never see it again, because this is the Key. I extorted it on pain of death from the fish, and he was not a trout but a carp – and what a carp! . . .'

. . . In these parts there really was a talking fish (said Gruffydd Gruffydd) and to prepare your mind for it, I refer you to news dispatches from San Francisco in May of 1958, in which it is demonstrated that the dolphin can be taught to speak. Dr John C. Lilly said so but, with a muddle-headedness I deplore, he indicated this warm-blooded creature once lived on land.

It would be far more pointed, and demonstrable, if he had said that once upon a time the ancestors of all living creatures lived in the water. Man's destiny is inextricably bound up with the coming and going of water; indeed, men and beasts and plants consist mostly of water. Dehydrate a potato, and what have you? A pinch of powder. Dehydrate a man, and see what you have got. Life is a watery thing.

You will argue: how can a fish speak without vocal chords? I might answer that there is speech and speech, above and below what we recognize as language, and that Sonar has detected a sort of speech among fishes; or, I might refer you to those trick violinists who can make a fiddle imitate a barnyard full of various birds and beasts, or a trumpeter who can get something like speech out of empty brass. Given a gasp of air, certain fishes can form words ventriloquially from the stomach, but that is their

last gasp because a fish cannot absorb air except by a certain process, having no lungs.

Yet the fish has been an object of worship for thousands of years: the Greek symbol of fertility was a fish; before the Greeks, Dagon of the Philistines was a fish-god; and the earliest Christian symbol was not the Cross, but the fish. Oh, I have read of many matters! Remember that I was a historian, which means to say that I had to explore legends, that I was an archaeologist and had to consider the beginnings of fairy-tales. Do not laugh, brother; a fairy-tale is nothing but smoke, but where there is smoke there is fire. Show me any fairy-tale you like and, not for the children, I will give you its materialistic basis. Surely, if we can rationalize 'Hansel and Gretel', we can venture in the shadowland that separates history from legend?

And I was an imaginative historian. I came to the Old Priory from Llanwnda, luckily wanting for nothing, partly because of something I had read in an old book but mostly because I wanted to be among strangers. You see, there is a kind of curse upon me: that while the nerves of my body urge me all the time to terrible physical efforts, their master, my brain, orders me to sit still. That way lies nervous breakdown, the compromise that is defeat, because the body bows to the head and degenerates while the head pays tribute to the corruptible body, thus itself growing corrupt; but it so happened that my researches here involved formidable manual labour and the exercise of every bone and nerve and muscle, while leaving the reasoning powers clean and bright, sharpening them in fact.

In the Priory, therefore, I found peace and quiet; I felt like a fine jewel packed in the wet wool of the mist, and in the firelight my books had a certain glow. The house

itself dates back only to the fourteenth century, but the original foundations were laid on pudding-stones. Nobody knows exactly what a pudding-stone is: it is a great ball of something harder than cement stuffed with flint pebbles, old before the Phoenicians came, older than the Pyramids, and even the Romans were afraid of them, these mysteries which extend over six hundred miles through the British Isles in an orderly pattern. A strange place, mine, for a priory? Yet in the north of England, there is a Consecrated Church in the cornerstones of which are pudding-stones. Among the Celts are many mysteries attached to standing-stones: bear witness Stonehenge, New Grange, etcetera. . . .

To be brief, in my pool, which was the old monks' pool, in my own grounds I caught the talking fish, and here is the ring on my finger to bear witness! The British Museum would give a pretty penny for this ring and America would pay more, but I will be buried in her. Most students are unaware that the finest enamel-work ever made came from ancient Britain: other Celtic tribes, in France or Ireland for example, made enamel but none like this; no, the Cymric folk had the art and the mystery of it, and this pattern you see is an ancient Druidic charm-sign that came out of Wales. You may see something like these spirals and circles as far away as Belfast and Brittany, but you will never see in these other places such enamel-work in blue. The gold, too, is out of these Welsh mountains.

And it is the key to the treasure no man may ever find. But I lost my nerve, poor me! I suppose it may be said that I caught with my bare hands the biggest carp ever captured and then, having conversed with it, let it go. Oh-ah, it may be said! Saying is one thing, and believing's another. Only imagine a golden carp about forty-five inches

long and weighing about sixty pounds! As for its age, I do not dare to guess at it, only technically speaking you know the carp is virtually immortal.

That carp was a legend in the days of Llew: it was supposed to be a magic carp, a fairy fish, and whosoever caught him, to this lucky man that carp could grant one wish – not three wishes, mind you, as the legends usually have it but only one wish. And I daresay you know that when you are dealing with the People of the Dark you must be very careful indeed. To give you an instance: in the time of Queen Anne, as the story goes, some lawyer who liked angling caught this carp, and the fish offered the lawyer one wish for its freedom. Well, the lawyer was a clever old man who had married a young wife. Oh, he was up to all the tricks: he knew that fairy gold is queer gold so he wished for nothing for himself, but believing his wife's protestations that her happiness was tied up in his own, he said, 'I wish that my wife Olwen may have her heart's desire.' Then he went home, fully expecting to find himself healthy, wealthy and happy, but his wife Olwen was in love with the apothecary. She put something in the lawyer's food so that he died miserably – and she got away with it, married the apothecary and lived happily ever afterwards. You see, he had not taken into consideration that Olwen had married him only for his money and that she secretly hated his innermost guts.

I am not a keen or a skilful fisherman; I play with the simplest tackle mainly for the pleasure of looking at the water. If I want to eat fish I send to the shop for it; and generally when I have any luck I throw the creature back, so as you may guess, it was not by any remarkable feat of skill that I caught the great Carp of the Priory Pool –

no, it appears that every so often at irregular intervals the pool empties itself in a few hours through an unknown channel into the underground spring that feeds it.

If you are lucky enough to come along at that time you can take out any number of carp, perch, dace, and so forth, with your fingers . . . and oh, what a holy massacre of fishes there would have been that night in 1939 if some of the local sportsmen, so-called, had been present when my pool drained itself. It did not run completely dry, you understand: there were inches of water in the deeper parts but not enough for the bigger ones to swim in. There was a full moon and, it being a warm summer night, I was walking in the grounds with my dog Blodwen, smoking my pipe and thinking.

I strolled over to where the willows are – and there was no pool! Where that large placid surface ought to have been, there was only a pitiful little shallow in which thousands of poor bewildered fishes wriggled and jumped, splintering the reflection of the moon like a shaving mirror, and Blodwen, who feared neither man nor beast, cringed back and howled with terror. I went closer and there, dead still among the weeds, where the water was deepest, I saw something that made my archaeologist's heart jump for joy: it was, as I thought, a superb sculpture in stone of a great fish, every scale clearly defined in the moonlight. Old as I am, I have sharp eyes.

I waded in, up to my knees in mud – Blodwen would not follow me – and bent to lift this piece of statuary. I am a runt, as they say, and no longer as young as I used to be, but I am stronger than many a fourteen-stone clod-hopper hereabout. I got my hands under its belly and heaved, and it came out of the mud with a sucking noise;

I was wearing good rough Welsh tweed which gave me a purchase upon this thing, but it was lighter than I thought so that I nearly fell backwards. Even while I was preoccupied with getting my balance I was astonished to feel this thing moving in my hands and to see, in the moonlight, its gills desperately opening and closing while its sullen mouth made certain motions and its horny old eyes slowly opened and looked at me with something other than the fishy stare of a creature designed by nature to see only in water.

In my surprise I nearly dropped it, but the impetus of what was nearly my fall carried me back to the edge of the pool; it was not until then that I fell into a sitting posture, still grasping that monstrous fish. I said, 'By God, I have caught the Great Fish of the Pool!'

Imagine my astonishment when this huge carp actually spoke to me, in a breathless whisper: no doubt a scientist would explain how air had got into its stomach and was being expelled, and that my romantic imagination translated this belching into human words, yet I swear to you that the fish spoke in the ancient Welsh tongue which has not been spoken for a thousand years but which I, as an antiquary, have learned to understand. It said, 'Let me go.'

Such is the nature of man, the hunter, that even in my shock of surprise I saw the fish stuffed in a glass case with my name on a brass plate underneath; simultaneously there flitted under the dome of my skull, like a bat in a cave, some quick thought of how much one might make out of the fish, touring the country with it in a tank but, thank goodness, the gentleman in me is always uppermost and, above that, the seeker after truth.

So I said, laughing at myself for my foolishness in talk-

ing to a fish, in ancient Cymric, 'You must be the talking fish of the pool.'

The fish whispered, 'I am. Let me go.'

'God's greeting, poor fish,' said I, 'but it is written down that you have the power to grant to whosoever catches you one wish.'

Then the fish gasped, 'One.'

I have told you that as far as health and wealth goes, I am a lucky man, and I have mentioned that I have read of the trickery of fairy gold, so I said, 'Money I have, health and strength beyond my years and, greatest blessing of all, I know what I want and have the wherewithal to seek it. Love I have got over, like measles. Here is my wish, then: tell me, O fish, the whereabouts of King Arthur's buried treasure and I will let you go.'

The fish answered, 'Let me go quickly or I shall die – but I am bound by an enchantment to give you your wish. Arthur's treasure? Here is the key—' and then, with a convulsive movement the fish regurgitated a small heavy object, and that same convulsive movement sent him slithering out of my arms and back into the pool.

I picked up this object and took it home; I washed it in hydrochloric acid because it was encrusted with the calcium deposits of centuries and then, with a soft brush, I cleansed it with soapy water until there emerged this beautiful ring: immemorial gold and impermeable enamel in this bygone magical pattern. Evidently, I reasoned, this pattern must match another exactly like it and when the two were brought together, somehow the way would be open to me and Arthur's treasure would lie at my feet.

Now understand me: I was not prompted by greed but

by that wonder which purges a man of earthly desire and I had no need for money or jewels or the value of them, whether intrinsic or historical; indeed, when I expressed my wish to the fish, I was quite convinced that there never was a King Arthur in his glory in Britain. Never mind what the silly fabulists say – King Arthur and his Knights came from France. In all Welsh mythology there is only a handful of Arthurian legend so that my request might almost be regarded as facetious; still, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and France were once one land-mass, and nothing travels farther or sticks so tight as a good story. Example: where is the brat that does not know the tale of Sinadabad of the Sea all the way from Arabia under the title of Sinbad, The Sailor? But I digress. . . .

The circular symbols on this ring, I suspected, must be cut in one of the mysterious standing-stones that go back to the time when history was an old wives' tale, which it is now, only literate and a paying proposition; and therefore I considered the great standing-stones from here to the Pyrenees. In Ireland there are tombs which bear almost the same markings as these on my ring, almost but not quite, which is not good enough. I tell you, for two years it was a torment to me: for instance, what if the standing-stone over King Arthur's treasure had by this time sunk into the English Channel? Remember, the fish had given me the key only and it would be like its malice to leave me with this key on my finger and twenty fathoms of bitter water between me and a hole in the seabed covered with twenty tons of rock, and, what is more, the war had broken out and it would have been an unlucky day for anyone fool enough to dredge the Channel.

Then fate came to my aid in the form – of all things! –

of a billy-goat. If I were inclined to womanish superstition, I might say that the goat *per se* has always played a mysterious part in Druidic legend – travel the length and breadth of Wales and see how many taverns are called the Goat and some, the Goat and Compasses, which is said to be a vulgar corruption of 'God Encompasseth Us', but what do you expect of people who turn the Infanta of Castile into the Elephant-and-Castle?

It happened in May – a stray he-goat with a nasty eye and very patchy about the coat came into my grounds seeking what he might devour and, after certain preliminary nibblings, he made for a flat stone that covered, as I had been informed, a disused well. This stone was crudely oblong, about twelve feet long, six feet in width and four feet deep at its thickest. It was pleasant to look at because it was covered with dense moss of a fine bottle-green. I prized that moss; in fact, I cut off a few squares of it and tried to encourage it to grow upon the walls of my house, but it would not – nothing but ivy clings to the stones of the Old Priory – so now, imagine my mortification when my old housekeeper wakes me up one morning, splashing and spluttering with enough 'whatevers' and 'goodnesses' as would fill a balloon, shouting, 'Dr Gruffydd, the blessed goat, look you, is eating your stone!'

I looked out of the window and said, 'You old fool, you, he is only licking at the moss!'

Then I did a double-take as they call it, because the goat could eat the whole stone for all I cared and good riddance to it – it was the moss I valued, you see? – so I took a good oak stick and ran out in my slippers. The goat stopped his licking to look at me out of his wicked yellow eyes until I caught him one on the rump that would have felled a

buffalo, but he only laughed as goats do, and walked slowly away. Then I looked to my moss; the beast had cleared away at least three square feet at the thickest end of the stone, polishing it as a hungry dog cleans a bone.

I looked once, and I looked twice, and then I hit myself on the forehead – because, cut into the granite, was a pattern exactly corresponding to that on the ring upon my finger!

I cursed myself for every kind of a fool. Here I had been looking for upright standing-stones, never considering the obvious: that a horizontal stone might once have been a vertical one, and it might easily have fallen down. And, naturally, this stone had been cut to stand upon its wide base where the ancient ones carved the secret sign.

The stone was there, I realized, to mark a spot, and here was my treasure – hidden, like truth, at the bottom of a well!

But was it a well, necessarily? As far as I knew the movements of the waters hereabout, there was no earthly need for a well; and who, digging one in this land of streams, would pick his spot in the middle of a little hill where my stone lay? No, I was convinced that this was what they call a pot-hole: one of those mysterious vents which occur all over the world, that used to be superstitiously avoided and were called 'bottomless pits'. Of course they are not bottomless, but they are very forbidding. Bless his heart – blind fool as he is, man is not called man without reason! Bold spirits, defying the dark and the unknown, clambered down into these bottomless pits and found that many of them were nothing but the entrances to a marvellous system of subterranean caves.

The exploration of these caves became a science called spelaeology, and many are the wonders that are to be found only a few yards under your feet: uncharted rivers, subterranean lakes, and the places in which our magnificent forefathers, the cavemen, survived facing fearful odds. Whenever I look at the statuary put up to forgotten nobodies I wonder, with a little tug at the heart, why some of these fussy fund-raisers have never bothered to put up in a conspicuous place a great granite monument in memory of the caveman out of whose loins, unworthy as we are, we have sprung.

Sir, charge your tankard and drink to the caveman! Thirty thousand years ago, naked and armed only with stones, he joined battle with monsters and fought the bitter cold of the outer dark and the terror of the unknown. I have explored many underground caverns, and my scientific curiosity gave place to awe when I saw with what the caveman had to contend, that you and I might sit upon stiff chairs and talk of spelaeology.

Now, backed by twenty natives and armed with a powerful rifle, seconded by a dead-shot white hunter, you make a virtue of knocking over a reluctant lion. These men, in those days, with a stick and a stone fought and defeated the sabre-tooth tiger, the woolly rhinoceros, the hairy mammoth and, worst menace of all, the terrible cave-bear. There was something: standing on his hind legs as bears do when they attack, he stood fifteen feet tall and his teeth were six inches long. This we know, because every museum in Europe has its skeleton of a cave-bear; they were as common as rats, almost, in olden times – yet, thank God, they are extinct and little man lives on to follow his destiny. Even this horror the caveman fought with his bare hands

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and his poor old flints, and killed him too and ate him, and kept himself and his wife and children warm with the great bear's shaggy pelt.

Yes, I cannot help believing that we are being preserved for some wonderful end because we have survived so much and suffered so greatly, and still hold our bloody heads high!

To proceed: I divined that the fallen stone covered a pot-hole, but how to be sure? Lift the stone, you might say; but how, without machinery and union labour? Remember, too, that the war was on and that labour and machinery were equally hard for an honest man to find; also, divine curiosity is strong hereabouts, the damned nosey-parkers. So, working the matter out, I decided to dig a tunnel obliquely, at an angle of about forty degrees under the stone: thus, if anyone became curious, I could simply say that I was digging an air-raid shelter. Of course, I needed assistance, but where to go for it without inspiring that Mother of Fairy-Tale known as Gossip? They are discreet men hereabout, but give them a story and they will swear your life away.

So I went for help to the most stupid man in the village, Rhys the idiot, who could not comprehend human speech but only knew sign-language ever since he fell forty feet on his head into a slate-quarry twenty years ago. But he had not forgotten the ways of the quarries and the grains of the rocks, and the staying of pits too, and could work for ten strong men, poor fellow. Rhys always liked me because I gave him jam and stuff, and a few shillings when he did some rough work about the place for me. By his standards I was not insane, and he loved me because I never exploited him like the rest; I simply told him that

such-and-such a job was necessary and I could pay no more than so-and-so, and there he was, eager and willing.

Rhys was the boy who carried Peris Williams's grey bull out of the quicksands with his naked hands and no rope, he also, as I am told, held up the pit when the props were caving in with his bare shoulders, and above all – he cracked a slab of the living rock with his skull when he fell – he could not talk. Still, he knew what I was saying when lured with cooking-sherry and tempted with lollipops, with which I enticed him – and oh man, he could dig like a badger and sense his way like a rat, and the weights Rhys could carry are beyond the knowledge of a physicist or the understanding of a mechanic. Yet here was the queer thing: while everyone in this locality shuns the Old Priory as the devil avoids holy water, the idiot Rhys had a kind of hankering after my place under the mossy rock, especially after dark. He sniffed and he whimpered there like a dog finding his way home, poor boy.

But here was my man, if I was to find that treasure; I wanted his dumb tongue and his strong back. Now this unhappy fellow Rhys had been famous in the quarries for his digging, his fetching and his carrying; I told you, I have seen him do the work of ten men, more or less, but the way he worked with me under my stone, in a manner of speaking, disgusted me because his *modus operandi* was not pertinent to that which walks upright on two legs.

Before, Rhys had only been a blessed madman but now he frightened me because he conducted himself as it were like a madman inspired: he broke two mattocks, a pick-axe and three spades. Bless us all, when the miserable

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creature had no tools to hand, he used his fingers and then I well understood why, in his quarrying days, they used to call him 'Rhys the Hoist', because whereas an ordinary navvy will pause to wipe his head or spit, and snatch a spare minute to lean on his shovel, Rhys went at his work like a lunatic: like me, like a man devoted, so that I, falling back in a species of horror, imagined that Rhys was nuzzling rather than digging his way into my ground under the stone.

And when I compelled him to stop, being exhausted myself, and Rhys came up, his eyes were different. To give you an image, have you seen a pond on a cloudy day? Good; it is the colour of the sole of your boot? So be it, but suddenly a cloud breaks and the pond shines – so some light cut through Rhys's clouds for a moment but when we were back in God's daylight the cloud came back and his eyes were dull. The spirit went out of Rhys and he held out a bleeding hand for sweets. *Covering a well,* said the gossips. Such apes should dig so for the water they never wash in!

We were cutting, not to be tedious with technicalities, into a sort of very ancient impacted clay of a depressing blueish colour, and the muck didn't want to move but budged reluctantly in bits and pieces, next door but one to stone you might say, and as full of rocks as a wedding-cake is of currants. Bad dirt; no farmer would break a ploughshare on it, although a geologist might find it worth his while to poke about in it, because here were all kinds of curious stones, the names of which would be interesting only to scientists. But there were some singular fossilized plants, two or three of which I put into my pocket and later had polished; they are older than coal

and quite elegant, and I will give you one to have mounted on a scarf-pin.

Now we had no need, much, in that dense stuff to prop our little cutting; Rhys was ahead of me and at the last moment I had to grab him by the foot because he had broken through into a black hole which might, for all anybody knew, have led down into the bowels of the earth. And here was a wild and fantastic thing: whereas your average fool is afraid of the grave, I had to exert all my strength to stop Rhys diving into it.

So I stayed him with apples and comforted him with flagons of some gaseous stuff because I was sick of the mephitic breath of that pit; sick I was with excitement too, and it was necessary – God forgive me! – for me to use my hands on Rhys to beat him away from the hole we had dug before the sun went down. Oh, but it was pitiful to see that poor creature so afflicted, whimpering, and so dreadfully torn between lust after a bottle of soda-pop and his urge to go down there.

That night I spent getting together my cave-explorer's kit: the spelaeologist's equipment, which consists in a good steel helmet, waterproof clothing, sound boots, essential tools, plenty of rope, a light rope-ladder, an aluminium cylinder of compressed oxygen – because one never knows how foul the atmosphere may be – above all a powerful electric light to be attached to the forehead, a good strong knife in case of emergency, and in case of interesting objects a little candid camera with flash-bulb attachment. Thus I might be moderately secure against the shocks of doom. The idiot Rhys I had to lock up; there was a kind of dementia upon him – he wanted to go under the ground, but I soothed him with apricot jam

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and told him that tomorrow we should go into hell together.

Also I gave him enough barbiturates to stun a bullock, but they bounced off him like so much bird-shot, and there he lay for hours with his jam-pots, staring into space and making a droning, dismal noise, so that I was glad to see the dawn. Rousing Rhys with a swipe under the ear – it would have knocked down an ordinary man but him it merely stung – I gave the order to proceed. Have you ever seen a human being walk through an oak door? Neither have I altogether, but Rhys got his head through so that my blood ran cold. It took all my strength to kick him loose, and there he stood with his poor face laid open from eyebrow to chin, thrusting out a sickening length of idiotic tongue to lick the blood away, what time he looked like something less than a mangled pariah dog.

Having out of pity slapped him in the jaw with a handful of iodine, I led him into the unknown, but it was difficult, I may say, to lead him because he was dragging me. Quick as I am on my feet, Rhys could lope like an infernal wolf now although he was supposed to be the slowest man in the slowest of all villages in this worst of all possible worlds. I tethered my rope-ladder, and here again creeps in the analogy of the goat: I mean, I am not superstitious, but I am an historian and hereabout the wood of the oak is supposed to have certain peculiar properties just as the ash and the thorn are regarded by the Saxons, in their blindness. Legend is the mother of history, so I fastened my ladder with pegs of these three woods. Now, admonishing Rhys to stand by with his strong, stupid back, I went down.

It will not be difficult for you to imagine my terror

when I felt heavy footsteps following me and, looking upwards, saw that it was Rhys, blank-eyed and drugged with bliss; and the horrid thought came to mind that, in going underground, *Rhys was going home!*

You have read of people being 'chilled to the marrow of their bones' but I hope it has never happened to you because it is no joke. It happens when enough is enough. Believe me, when I saw that ponderous fellow getting light on my ladder and noticed a certain illumination of his leaden face the deeper he stepped into the darkness, upon my soul I felt something like a bird trying to get out of my rib-cage. Damn him, Rhys was coming with me into his own element which was at heavy pressure: now he was at home and I was not, and while he seemed to live in dread of the light world of ordinary man, the deeper he descended the more understanding his expression became, so that when he touched ground it was I who was afraid of Rhys. And this was the one who, a few yards above, had been afraid of me.

It became evident to me just then that this great pale idiot belonged below the surface of this fine, unexplored earth, which the silly science-fiction writers regard as a mere kicking-off place for a few hundred million miles into the guts of the Galaxies and we, poor wretches, unaware of the marvels underfoot; 'Put your trust in Providence and keep your powder dry,' said the sage whose name eludes me; and so I did. For *powder*, read camera, iron rations, water and brandy; and keep your head clear whatever else gets muddled.

Now Rhys was tugging at me with a fierce urgency, so that I was compelled to reprimand him; but my voice had a certain reverberation and by the acoustics I knew

that this tunnel must lead to a kind of dome. At this point, having to bow to the roof of the cave, by sheer luck my lamp picked out a circular grey object – virgin gold, sir, encrusted with dirt and cast in high relief in the shape of a swan, and it was one of the most beautiful coins ever minted. On the other face was the head of Apollo, signed by Theodotos.

But this was first struck as a *silver* coin! Here was a mystery, indeed: the silver coins of Clazomenae at about 370 B.C. are well known to collectors, but the coins of Theodotos of Clazomenae used to be cast, or pressed, in white metal. Preoccupied with the job in hand I simply put this gibbous disc into my pocket. Later I wondered exactly why such a piece should occur under Britain, in pure gold; but, then, I found some more coins. Most of them were eroded or, as it were, gnawed away by age and oxidation; but they were my meat and I picked them up. If I digress, forgive me, but it would have taken wild horses to get me out of that cavern just then.

Though no collector of coins, I am conversant with what the Greeks, etcetera, put out. In passing, I will confess that once I believed that when Greek meets Greek they open a restaurant but time taught me better; and so, a little further down, finding a tetradrachm of Dionysius I marvelled because it was undamaged except by the elements, and clean and pure, give or take a few deposits. Oh dear me, calcium was the only interest *that* buried gold ever gained! But, the most fantastic thing of all, here were scattered coins by Kimon with head of Arethusa, 408 B.C. on its reverse, and one of Akragas engraved by Myron depicting the chariot of Helion; only I repeat, here was one of the most curious crime stories in the world,

because instead of counterfeiting a silver coin in a base metal this artist had turned it out in pure gold! But I tell you that there was a time when silver was vastly more valuable than gold, and gold was despised like lead which, for your information, is at present more valuable than silver. So runs the world away.

Now, when you ask me how came such numismatic treasures underground in a Welsh village, I can only say, 'Friend, nothing is done without a reason. Give thanks, therefore, for hoarders and misers without whom there would be no evidence of history!' The old sea rovers went far afield and broke into many a treasure a thousand years ago or more; and hoarded it in their turn, like Indian princes. They lived by the sword and by the sword they died; only superstition has it that they 'set a guardian' over their treasure, which generally took some horrid form. Our forefathers thought these guardians were ghosts, but I do not believe in old wives' tales. What ghostly guardian worth his salt would scatter gold coins of Ionia, Aegina, Peparethos, Croton, Aetna and Sybaris, and leave savage tooth-marks in a coin of Lysimachus of Alexandria?

I admit they might have had some power such as the Druids are alleged to have had, but it must have been over the beasts; thinking thus, I began to be thankful that Rhys was gibbering ahead of me rather than behind me. I am compelled to admit that I wished I had gone to old General Perfrement in the Home Guard and had borrowed his 55-70 rifle with the big soft-nosed bullets, light for its weight, with an equal kick at both ends, but made to knock over a four-ton elephant. Mind you, I would not have used it on Rhys – but *guardian, guardian, guardian*

kept trickling through my mind and I remembered the old cave-bear. There is nothing so wonderful in this: these subterranean lakes are full of fish and other strange anachronistic creatures, and it struck me that a 55-70 rifle would be just the thing for a cave-bear. Our grandfathers, bless them, did it with rocks.

Here might be our 'guardian'. Depóret said that just when a species has reached the height of its power either in bodily size or in weapons, offensive and defensive, and thus seems safe against all enemies, that species is on the verge of disappearance. But who was Depóret? A Frenchman – and who are these people with their sputniks and and tentacled jellies of moon calves, to tell me that *Ursus Spelaeus*, the huge bear of the caves, does not still walk about not much deeper than your subway?

I certainly did not feel at home as I went down and down, armed only with a knife and an idiot for company; and there was this poor old light bobbing and weaving on my forehead and showing up such a Bond-Streetery of geological gems as would have made a scientist sick with envy. And then we came to a heap of scrambled bones of the reindeer, the woolly rhinoceros and the mammoth. Incidentally, gnawed skulls of men. One tusk was carved and I wished I could carry it but I could not, so I said, 'All right, stay underground and I will come back for you,' and so we went on, Rhys leading the way while my light made a fantasy of that cavern; shadows dancing in a jeweller's shop. If I had not been a born fool I might have known that such stupendous reverberations of the human voice, even given a nice dome, must have bounced off water and that in front of me was a pool or a lake.

As for the dome, I was right, only it happened to arch

over the lake; behind it, a passage somewhat in the shape of a titanic trumpet. What a stance for an actor, you might think! Quite right, for so did I. I said to Rhys, 'Irritate me, baby, certainly you do with your undisciplined behaviour!' – but now he had me by the arm and was urging me to follow him, if the tug of a tractor might be described as an urge. Believe me, I had no love for that puddle but I went in: a) I am a Welshman, b) I had no choice. But this son of a dog appeared to know his way, and got more excited with every step, and although the underground pressure worked on my lungs and made me feel as if I had swallowed a cannonball, Rhys the idiot walked light – bounced like a ball and floated like a cork – this one who, on God's green earth, was too heavy for his legs!

To tell the truth, I was devoured by a mad curiosity: it was my duty, you see, to follow the trail of the gnawed bones and the bitten forged gold coins, to follow knowledge as the poet says like a sinking star beyond the utmost bound of human thought – and me, if you please, led by the hand by a hopeless idiot. Rhys could ford that black and silent water. Once, when I felt the disturbance in the water of some slippery beast he tipped my helmet so that the beam of my light struck straight down and that thing, whatever it was, swirled away from the glare of it.

And so it came to pass that with the help of God and the idiot we got over the Twilight Sea – Twilight, I say, because it was only half-dark on account of some phosphorescence in the fungus above and in some luminous organisms in the water. The effect was lead-blue, a long way removed from God's golden light: it made the darkness darker and increased the bitterness of the cold. And

here is the queer thing: the nearer we got to the other side, the calmer Rhys got and the more uneasy I became, so that when, suddenly, he flipped off the switch of my headlamp I almost lost my nerve – would have done, if his huge hand had not been on my arm like a clamp. So we found land. Above us I heard a whirring, evidently of bats, and in the distance a kind of twittering noise which I could not define.

I reached to switch on my lamp, but Rhys without haste plucked it out of its socket and crushed it in his hand. So he led me into the dark, I following and saving my strength as it is wise to do when in doubt and outweighed; the poor idiot could not possibly know, I reasoned, that a man like me could not pin all his hopes on one lamp, neither could he appreciate the fact that I was driven by something stronger than myself. And who knows but that which motivated the idiot was exactly the same as what motivated me? Only he didn't know it. Deeper we went, and deeper, and everywhere in that ghostly luminescence I caught a glimpse of broken bones, what time Rhys was chattering with pleasure. As he chattered, he emitted a description of a buzzing whistle, which the echoes answered – but were they echoes? No. One time, when Rhys paused for breath, a whole chorus of modulated whistles came out of the remote darkness, and when he whistled back there was an excited hooting as of half-coherent owls.

In a little while he pulled me to a stop, and then I saw, making their appearance in that cavern, what might look like incandescent grapes – pale green with a light behind – dogs' eyes, only nature never made a dog with eyes so high above the ground. You will believe that I was mad?

Right, so I was, but not altogether: I was a victim of that lust for knowledge which is stronger than hunger and thirst and the love of women. I would leave my bones to be gnawed down there, but I should see what lay beyond.

And I saw – yes, I saw the Guardians of the Treasure – not dogs, not bears, but men; and I hope that even your enemies may not see such men in dreams.

My first impression was that they were a kind of phantasmagoria. But ghosts, presumably, have not got two sexes, and do not smell. They came closer and there they were, the Old Ones of the Twilight, grey as candle-grease, without foreheads or chins. I was as good as dead. What saved me? That which made me something better than a beast, consideration of the possibility that someone might come after me and a desire to leave a record so that I could no more help taking a photograph of these fellows than one can help sneezing. They closed in, and I could see that they were armed with stone hammers and clubs.

Then I pressed the shutter of my good camera, and the bulb flashed – and, my friend, the impact of that sudden crash of light struck even me like a fist between the eyes. With how much more shock effect must it have hit the retinas of those poor creatures who had never seen the light of day!

In the instant of that flash I saw a semi-circle of terrified faces, debased, but nonetheless human; and I also saw that their naked bodies were patterned with intricately interlaced tattooed rings. The darkness rushed in again, but I could hear their terrified voices; Rhys too was frightened and let go of my arm – and I, I made a dash for the Twilight Sea, praying to be saved from the

mysterious creatures in its shallow depths and hoping to be guided to the other side and my rope ladder; but now, I knew that I had a weapon more potent than any 55-70 rifle and this weapon was light.

As I went, I heard behind me Rhys's long buzzing whistle, and again a chorus of such answering whistles. A stone club flew past my head: my flash, thank goodness, had dazzled them sufficiently to spoil their aim for the time being. Then a spear got me in the shoulder; but it glanced off my aluminium oxygen tank and scarcely broke my skin, so I turned, knee-deep in water and flashed my bulb three times more, thereby saving my life but ruining the most extraordinary photograph of all time.

But the light preserved me: they could not bear it. Once, something bit at me, but again my heavy boots saved me. Later I found, embedded in the leather, several teeth from the jaws of an immense eel. And once I walked into a hole so that the water came up to my chin – me holding my camera above my head like a torch which, when something brushed my cheek, I flashed again and so caught a glimpse of a colossal water-rat which shot away in a streak of phosphorescence. Then I was in the shallows again, and wading for my life. So I found my ladder and climbed, it seemed to be for miles, because I felt something heavy on the lowest rung and knew that one of them must be following me.

But I scrambled through my tunnel and out into the cool air of a beautiful evening. That something was still climbing; I drew my knife and cut the ladder. Just as the last strand parted, I caught a glimpse of the face of Rhys; then it disappeared and I heard him strike bottom and yell with anger or pain. Merciless, you say? No, not a bit

of it because, you see, Rhys had gone back to his own people. I knew his mother; when he did an odd job for me I paid his wages directly to her and she always told me that she could not understand what had happened to the lad. 'He was a beautiful child,' she said, 'and bright as a shilling until he was three years old; and then, look you, he changed overnight into the poor thing you know. It was like magic. You would have said that the Little People who live underground, as the old stories say, had crept up in the dark and changed him for one of their own. Only I am a God-fearing woman and do not believe in such things.'

It was not for me to tell her that there might be more to this old wives' tale than met the eye. In the wilder parts of Wales and Cornwall, some people still believe in the Little People that live underground. Some call them Pixies, while in Cornwall they call them Piskies. And who were the Little People who were driven underground when the Romans came? The Picts. Do you get the connection? They disappeared into the labyrinth under England and stayed there, fifteen hundred years ago. They only came out at night to steal food or bits of metal. The country people, to placate them, left out bowls of porridge for them. And why did these Picts, Pixies, or Piskies steal babies? To keep their race alive – horrid thought!

I was full of wonderful resolutions: I would go back underground with a couple of friends and my armaments would be cameras, powerful lamps, and things to eat such as cheese, honey, etcetera; I'd find that mysterious treasure, whoever it had belonged to, and bring back something the world would not forget in a hurry. So much for my plans. Then came the Blitz over Bristol, the ter-

rible night when that brave city fought in the smoke of its own burning. One German bomber, badly crippled, staggered westward and, before it came down, its pilot jettisoned a thousand-pound bomb which landed precisely in my little tunnel under the fallen stone.

The explosion, when it struck bottom, was appalling, and there was such a cave-in that it would take a hundred Welsh miners twenty years to excavate. Needless to say, I am having considerable difficulty in getting co-operation from the government.

I can just imagine that great fat fish laughing up his sleeve, so to speak. . . .

Gruffydd Gruffydd shook his head. Then he took out a great wallet and said, 'Here is what I picked out of my shoulder when I got home.'

I said, 'It looks like a bit of a broken knife.'

'No, it is the tip of a broken sword – old English iron, forged about the time of the Emperor Diocletian, about the year 300 A.D. I carry it for luck. That is what they threw at me down there in the dark. . . .

'Well, one more glass of ale, and then good night.'

The Secret History of a Hero

General Norman Tremorgan was everybody's Somebody – and nobody's Anybody: like Chaucer, Shakespeare, General George Washington, Robert Browning, the Duke of Wellington and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, he has to be regarded in the light of his achievements rather than his personality, and a paragraph in any Dictionary of Biography could comfortably cover what he had done, in what great events he had been concerned, and with whom he had been associated.

Privately, he had no friends and seemingly no enemies. After a long life, thirty years of which were spent as a good soldier, there was no more of him on record than you could cover with two fingers. Red tape incarnate, maddeningly punctilious in finding fault as he was terribly tedious in recognizing virtue, it was in the nature of this martinet that if you had served under him you would have boasted of his blame but never of his approval. It is on record that after a memorable battle, having thrust back a mad charge of drugged Dervishes in the Sudan, Tremorgan had

the roll called for the reeling fag-end of a company, and put under open arrest a tired foot-soldier who was leaning on his rifle upon a charge of 'standing idle on parade'.

A competent general, I grant you; a fighting general without question, yes; a soldier's soldier, yes again – yet the most hated man in the British Army. Every step of his way up from bottom to top, everybody hoped and prayed that Tremorgan might fall down dead, because here was an ice-cold bureaucrat who fought through the proper channels every inch of the way like a ferret through rat holes – a ferret without appetite, but he couldn't give up until his teeth met and he had snagged his prey.

Yet behind this extraordinary behaviour was an extraordinary reason.

This monolith of a man, you see, was a kind of self-made volcanic rock, cold enough to freeze yourself on and hard enough to cut glass, but in reality formed by a terrible fire under pressure, set off by a chain-reaction born of underlying passion. Norman Tremorgan never loved; yet an analysis of this hopeless passion of his makes Romeo and Juliet or Heloise and Abelard appear mere summer holiday goo-goo, and the history of Tremorgan's hopeless lust for his just revenge makes the bloodiest stories about Corsican vendettas read like something comfortable.

Not exactly inhuman, Tremorgan came as near as a man can get to the perfection of a computing machine which, fed some question a hair's breadth off the mathematical certainty, will blink and send your tape back, and all has to be done again until you ask the right question for the right answer. That's where Man has to win in the end, because a machine can't ask questions. And

that's how General Tremorgan lost at last, because he couldn't query or deviate.

Born what they call 'regimental' – the sort of old soldier whom we used to fear worse than death, but whom we learned to laugh at in retrospect, thank God! – Tremorgan when he was only sergeant-major, getting back to barracks five minutes late after a two weeks' furlough, registered a complaint against himself and had himself severely reprimanded. But he did come of a good military family: one of his ancestors rose from foot-soldier to full colonel about the time of the War with America, next to impossible in those days; and his son became a colonel too – Sir Trevor Tremorgan nicknamed 'The Skinner' because never a day passed without his sending some soldier to be flogged by the drummers. About the middle of the nineteenth century the family fell on evil days, and Norman Tremorgan's father, a major who was cashiered because of something to do with cards, kept an unsuccessful draper's shop in Putney until he died insolvent when the child was six.

So little Norman had to go, first of all, to a vulgar school for common boys, and it was here that he met another son of a military family in reduced circumstances, one Peter Spicer. Tremorgan in his prime was never a big man; he was thin, erect and wiry. But Spicer was one of those great beefy boys with a face that was swollen and red, who looked and sounded as if he was blowing a trumpet. He was the bully of the school and, naturally, picked upon the little new boy and beat him savagely.

Young Tremorgan brooded over his wounds and came back for a return bout, was licked again, but still came back; until the threadbare bluster of Spicer wore through

and he said, with one of those insincere laughs, 'Come on, we'll let bygones be bygones.'

But little Tremorgan said, 'No I can't. Not until I have given you the beating you deserve. We'll meet again in the playground Monday morning, and I'll whip you until you cry for mercy the way *I* never did!'

Only there was no fight next Monday because Bully Peter Spicer was notified the same afternoon that his mother's application for his admission to the Duke of Clarence's Military School had been favourably considered. So he went off – not exactly in a cloud of glory, because the British soldier was much despised in those days, but with a certain swagger.

Little Norman Tremorgan stayed behind, frustrated, unforgiving: the scheme of things had been left uncompleted; there was something amiss in the question-tape that kept coming and going through and through the ineluctable machinery of his strange young mind. Eighteen months later he too was sent to the Duke of Clarence's School; and he went with a case-hardened knot of joy in his metallic heart, because he had so successfully devoted his spare time to the study and practice of fighting with the fists that a local wine merchant, who had once fought eighteen rounds with Jem Mace, said, 'Give me that kid for five years and so help me he'll be a glutton for the lightweights!'

Now the Duke of Clarence's School, which was for the male orphans of insolvent old soldiers, was conducted on strictly military lines. Teachers and pupils wore uniforms and paraded for classes, meals, prayers and sleep. They moved to the voice of the bugle, not the bell or the gong; were caned by a drum major, and promoted not by a head-

master but by a commandant. While other schools had their school captains, monitors or prefects, the Duke of Clarence's had its corporals, sergeants, etcetera. Imagine the bitter woe of the boy Tremorgan when he discovered that his enemy Spicer was a Class Corporal, inviolate under his two half-stripes – ready as a reckoner, smart as a whip, an example to the slovenly and a bully to his inferiors in rank.

He greeted Norman Tremorgan with a cry of delight; scattered the smaller boy's kit on the dormitory floor and kicked him as he stooped to pick it up; then, when Tremorgan neither shed tears nor uttered a cry, Spicer knocked him down and reported him for 'dumb insolence'. Norman Tremorgan could have cut the big fellow to pieces with his knotty little fists but he was inhibited by an ancient instinct that compelled him to abide by the written rules. These rules clearly laid down that in no circumstances might one raise a hand even in self-defence against someone in authority. It was unthinkable.

True, these same rules forbade a man in authority to strike an inferior. But what happened, then, if your private soldier, acting on his right, went to the sergeant and said, 'Please, sir, the corporal hit me'? He would be earmarked forever as a snivelling sneak, a tale-bearer and a trouble-maker; and made to suffer from both ends. So little Tremorgan held his peace, doubly outraged by the unwritten law that held the Queen's Regulations in contempt. Yet this was but another in a fiendish series of frustrations.

Frightened, I imagine, by a certain ugly flicker at the back of his victim's otherwise quiet eyes, Spicer again tried to make peace. Young Norman simply said, 'Today

to me, tomorrow to thee' – he had read this on a gravestone – and worked like a demon for promotion.

He could not lay violent hands on Spicer until they were of equal rank, don't you see – and the mechanism that activated him would not stop running until the score was even. Tremorgan was a brave man bound to follow certain inescapable premises; you might think of him as a fine-bred greyhound on a racetrack doomed to run itself to death after a mechanical rabbit designed always to be two jumps ahead . . . Or, like a bank with a perpetual discrepancy of one penny in its accounts.

Tremorgan became a corporal a year before the estimated minimum time; and on that very same Commandant's Orders, when he was given his tapes with the warmest congratulations, Spicer was made up to sergeant. And so it went on, until they passed out of the Duke of Clarence's School and went – as that low form of military life called 'Boys' – at the age of fourteen, into the Army. Now, at last, they were on an equal footing, but as luck would have it, Spicer was sent to a regiment in the south of England and Norman Tremorgan to another one in the north.

A Boy was supposed to learn some trade, while he was going through the painful process of arriving at the age of eighteen or so. There wasn't a very wide range of choice; it seems that they both became drummers. Spicer was the wicked young swaggering drummer of tradition, frequently caned by the drum-major for smoking and swearing, but well liked notwithstanding; also, young Spicer had a knack of ingratiating himself with those who might do him most good. But young Tremorgan in his outfit

was never in trouble, never admonished – and was thoroughly disliked.

He was admired only for his consummate skill as a boxer, but would fight with no one above or below his immediate rank, and was never known to spit, smoke or swear. Still, his efficiency was such that he was a full corporal before he was nineteen; and then he applied to be transferred to Spicer's regiment. So, in due course, he was. He arrived to find that Spicer too, but by sharp and devious practices, had been promoted to corporal – only he had got drunk, to 'wet his stripes' as the saying goes, and had been reduced to private two days later.

And how can a corporal thrash a private? Bitter frustration again! So now Spicer was cringing and obsequious to corporal Tremorgan, who devoted himself to helping his enemy get his stripes back. And one fine day Spicer and Tremorgan were called on Orders: Spicer was reinstated as corporal – but Tremorgan was promoted to sergeant!

And by the time Spicer became a sergeant, Norman Tremorgan was company sergeant-major. If only Spicer could get to be company quartermaster-sergeant, Tremorgan felt, he would be justified *now* in wiping out this oppressive debt of honour that seemed to be lying on his chest and multiplying at compound interest year by year – and oh, what a day of reckoning there would be then! On the surface Tremorgan was, as always, militarily neat and socially correct, but inwardly he drooled for his hour of revenge.

Indeed, Spicer was eventually promoted; but that very same day it was Tremorgan's bitter lot to pin up an Order from the commanding officer saying that it had been

brought to his attention that the men of this regiment had been 'increasingly given to the practice of private fisticuffs, and that this practice should cease forthwith under pain of disciplinary action' . . . At this point the regiment was ordered abroad to fight in West Africa, whence – after a short but bloody campaign – it emerged with another battle-honour on its colours, and Sergeant-Major Tremorgan, the conspicuous hero of the campaign, was awarded the Victoria Cross for as valorous a series of deeds as ever won that coveted decoration. Here are the important details:

With all the officers and most of the men of his company dead or wounded in a cunning ambush, he had held a seemingly hopeless position for two days and a night, having by right of seniority assumed command. Alone, under cover of the dark he had made numerous excursions to the river for water and, through extremely heavy enemy fire, had made no less than nine almost suicidal ventures into the open, carrying back the wounded in his arms.

The last man he brought in, who was shot in the chest, was 'Quartermaster-Sergeant Spicer whom Sergeant-Major Tremorgan, though himself severely wounded in the hip and thigh, had dragged to safety, collapsing from loss of blood when the reinforcements came up. Tremorgan having torn up his shirt for bandages . . .' You know the turgid language of dispatches and citations.

Norman Tremorgan came out of this scuffle a captain and a national hero. And somehow Spicer derived prestige from the fact that he had been saved from death by Norman Tremorgan; he emerged with a Distinguished Service Medal, and soon became lieutenant and quartermaster, known as 'The Man Tremorgan Saved'.

It was here that some vital spark went out in the soul of Captain Tremorgan, like when a high-carried weight breaks loose and your centre of gravity goes wandering so that your life becomes a kind of flabby deadweight, a seasickness of the spirit like you get when your anchor comes loose and you roll adrift. Psychologically speaking, it is an unbalancing in the middle-ear of the will. For now, Tremorgan felt *indebted* to Spicer – because he had saved the fellow's life! He could have left Spicer to die, and no shame for him; but according to the rule, Tremorgan was bound to do his best for a wounded comrade. So he did; and in so doing, he threw away some of the meaning of his own life.

Now – and here's the terrible irony of it – it happens that if you save a man from death some instinct makes you want to preserve him forever. You have a holy duty to the person you have won from the grave; you belong to him thereafter as a farmer belongs to his land. The laws of property get mixed with the laws of values: you hold the lease on somebody's destiny and dare not foreclose – you are manacled to him like a father to a son. Similarly, a mother often best loves her ugliest and most troublesome child, or so they say. Is this true love, or some unhealthy sublimation of pity? The evolutionists say that it is unnatural to spend your strength on the weak – but even dogs do it.

To proceed; Norman Tremorgan now felt himself called upon to cherish the despicable Spicer. He could no more have given Spicer that overdue and well-deserved thrashing than you or I could flog a midget. Heretofore Tremorgan had been panting at Spicer's heels, hot for revenge; but that was when Spicer was the stronger. Now,

he went to all kinds of lengths to avoid him, because he dreaded more than anything to be disarmed, and when Spicer, with his moist dog's eyes, lifted a paw in a limp handshake and whimpered, 'You saved my life,' Tremorgan was helpless with impotent disgust.

Poor Tremorgan: Spicer was his inferior now and forever and, therefore, this great soldier was the slave of pity for his one real enemy! So he seemed to shrink into himself while Spicer, expanding, got fat on his saviour's shadow. He married the daughter of a well-to-do wholesale grocer and in no time at all was lording it as a major, while Tremorgan V.C. was marching against Fa'ouzi in the Sudan.

Here was a fabulous affair – Tremorgan and the remains of a company in a ring of fire and out-numbered five hundred to one! It was said that, given support, Tremorgan might have saved General Gordon; but he was not supported, and was abandoned in that burnt-up land. The story might have ended there if Captain Tremorgan V.C. had not snatched up a dead boy's drum and, remembering from his youth a rousing tattoo, rub-a-dubbed his bewildered men back into action, himself at their head with nothing but a bit of tight parchment between himself and a thicket of spears.

The enemy gave way. When he was captured, Fa'ouzi said, 'Tirimorogan was afflicted by Allah, wherefore we could not touch him.' This was another way of saying 'Tremorgan was mad'. The general officer-in-command – quoting, as usual, somebody else – wished that, if this were the case, Tremorgan might bite a few of his other captains. Thus it was Lieutenant-Colonel Tremorgan who took his battalion into action at Omdurman, and Colonel

Sir Norman Tremorgan who limped out. And in an unpublished dispatch – for the editorial spike punctures even the best of us! – young Winston Churchill wrote: '. . . Officers and men alike fear the glint in Tremorgan's grey eye more than the flash of 500 Sudanese swords; but the sight of his face in the forefront of a battle is more heartening than the cheers of half a brigade of reinforcements . . .'

Spicer, in the meantime, was in business in an under-the-counter way. His father-in-law, the grocer, had got a contract to supply the Armed Forces with jam, bully-beef, etcetera. Spicer had a hand in this affair, and when the Boer War broke out, he was a brigadier in Stellenbosch, while Colonel Sir Norman Tremorgan was holding that geographical blind-alley historically known as the Rooi-Kloof Deathtrap – from which he made a cunning sortie and wiped out Wynand's Commando and captured General Pereira Dutoit.

Wounded again, Tremorgan was made major-general. On his bed of pain, he never forgot Spicer and, in those hopeless, wishful dreams that weave in and out as they cut you off from the world, he saw himself at hand-grips at last with his old adversary. But this was not to be. As he awoke, the visions fled.

Spicer's father-in-law died. Retiring with the rank of major-general, Spicer went into the City as a wholesale dealer in provisions. And how was it possible for a regular soldier, an officer and a gentleman, to break regulations to the extent of hitting the meanest of civilians ever so lightly? Especially if he had saved the creature's life?

General Sir Norman Tremorgan got thinner, while Spicer got fatter. Spicer had a family, now; but Tremorgan

was alone. Three pounds a week would have covered Tremorgan's personal expenses; but Spicer splashed his dirty money around and about to the extent of ten thousand pounds a year in entertainment alone, although he was still mean with his servants. In the clubs and chophouses around Threadneedle Street, where the stockbrokers pass their three-hour luncheon periods, Spicer was known as a man who would give you the shirt off his back. But at home in his fine house near Sevenoaks it was said, 'God help any poor soul that's got to come to Spicer for a shilling!' Whereas Norman Tremorgan was free-handed and liberal in an indifferent, anonymous, aristocratic way; but, he never entertained company.

Once, Spicer, wanting the name of General Sir Norman Tremorgan V.C. on some Board of Directors, approached him with a lucrative proposition. Then Tremorgan burst out, 'Go to the devil! How dare you? Have you forgotten Christ Church School? Have you forgotten the Duke of Clarence's?'

'No, Norman,' said Spicer, 'I was remembering them. They were good times in the old days, weren't they?'

'They were not, Spicer, they were not.'

'And oh, when I was coughing pink froth on the burning sand, and you saved my life . . . !' Spicer sighed and touched his chest. 'Ah, Norman, those were the days.'

'You were wheezing like a winded dog. I didn't give a fig for your beastly life, and I don't now. I wish I hadn't been there! I wish you had died! I owe you more than one beating, and could give them to you too, only you're not worth a broken knuckle. I despise you and want nothing to do with you. You have done me a great wrong. You

have put me morally in your debt like the coward that you are and left me with no means to pay you. Get out!'

'But *I* am in *your* debt, Norman.'

'That's the point. *And don't call me Norman!*'

So Spicer got out, and he prospered until the exposure of the great tinned-meat scandal in 1918: this was one of the few that couldn't be quite hushed up; scores of soldiers died of botulism after eating the canned-goods labelled *Spicer's For Purity, Better Than The Best*. The Liberal Party took it up with a vengeance, and Spicer was the 'patsy'.

He was utterly disgraced, and came to much the same state of affairs in commerce as a new boy comes to in a strange school, alone among bullies. Now, in vulgar parlance, 'to get a spicer' was as much as to say 'to be poisoned'. The very name of the fellow became synonymous with rottenness and corruption. The Spicer fortune dwindled in the course of a dozen hopeless lawsuits – 'fruitless as Spicer's Jam', as the wags described them – and all those jolly good shirt-off-the-backers in the City crossed the street when they saw him coming.

Spicer lost his houses and his lands, and became one of those aggrieved nuisances who make comic strips of themselves in the pubs where newspapermen talk shop. The last of Spicer's money evaporated in the 1920's when he went into partnership with a Belgian who said he was marketing an automobile to retail at eighty-five pounds. Once again the fool signed something he shouldn't have, so that when the Belgian absconded Spicer had to find five thousand pounds or be prosecuted for obtaining money under false pretences. To whom could he turn but Tre-

morgan, who was now a very great person indeed and in the running for a Field Marshal's baton?

But Spicer did not dare to call himself – but sent his wife, a quiet, pale, sweet but firm ash-blonde who reminded Tremorgan of his half-forgotten mother.

To his unspeakable embarrassment she fell on her knees in a determined kind of way and cried, 'General! You saved my husband's life! Now save his honour! Think of the children! Have pity!'

It must have been like something out of a Russian novel. Tremorgan wrote a cheque for five thousand pounds, and begged the lady to go away. Spicer's honour was saved, but some false story of the affair got about – for Spicer could never keep his silly mouth shut – and overnight Tremorgan was the talk of the City as a marvellously astute but shady businessman operating under the cover of a general's uniform, while Spicer was heartily slapped on the shoulder again up and down Cheapside as the dark horse who was backed by Tremorgan.

So Spicer was in business again; and Tremorgan's career was ended. With the knack of his kind, Spicer managed to rub the mud off himself onto Tremorgan, where it somehow stuck. A few years later he called on Tremorgan and, offering a cheque, said, 'Little matter of five thou', Norman.'

Tremorgan tore the cheque up and threw the pieces into Spicer's face, saying, 'You dirty rotter! Everything is square between us, now, and I am going to give you what you deserve!' He took down a heavy riding-crop. 'Will you be beaten like a dog, or put your hands up like a man?'

Spicer laughed and said, 'Thirty years ago, Norman old boy, I'd have been glad to accommodate you. But I

mustn't. Doctor's orders. Blood pressure. Why, if I walked from here to Oxford Circus I'd fall down dead.'

'Go,' said Tremorgan. 'Never speak to me again.'

'If that's the way you want it, Norman—'

'—And don't call me Norman!'

After Spicer was gone, Norman Tremorgan threw the riding-crop into the fire and watched it burn to ashes.

And three days later, Spicer died.

Tremorgan passed the last years of his life as he had passed the first, listening to the bugle. He found a decent hotel in Pirbright, near the Guards' Camp, where he could hear the calls; so he rose at Reveille, ate when they sounded Officers' Mess and went to bed at Lights Out. He owed all he had ever gained to Spicer – and Spicer owed him all he had ever lost. Before he died, they say, he kept repeating, over and over, 'The conqueror's prize is dust.'

The Strange Fate of Jonah the Moaner

Snapping off his sentences like a ventriloquist's dummy while he worried his sturgeon sandwich, Jonah the Moaner said, 'Thanks for covering me up, son. I appreciate it.'

'I didn't see anything much to take cover from,' I said.

'No? I did. You didn't see a fellow with a face like an egg? Derby hat? Walking with an umbrella, smoking a pipe?'

'*He* looked harmless enough.'

'Not to me he ain't. I'd walk a mile to avoid that man. I'd take a cab!'

'How much do you owe him?' I asked.

'Not a cent, and that's the cockeyed part of it.'

'Well, how much did you shake him down for?'

'Son,' said Jonah the Moaner, with dignity, 'that guy's a multi-millionaire today, and he owes every penny of it to me.' The thought seemed to trouble him, for he grimaced horribly and choked on his coffee. 'Personally, I

think he's some kind of devil, or something. He haunts me.

'Son, I'm an old man, and I don't scare easy. Kid, I've talked back to Gyp the Blood, I've talked back to Becker, I've defied Legs Diamond; but that character frightens all hell out of me. He's a sort of a vampire. Oh, I don't mean he flies around and bites people. I mean to say, a kind of a business vampire.'

'Clever?' I asked. 'A crook?'

'Boy,' said Jonah the Moaner, 'he is the dumbest dope in the United States of America, and he is strictly legit. Only he hexes me.'

This line of talk did not surprise me, because Jonah the Moaner belongs to that peculiar brotherhood of nameless men which is to be found in its highest concentration in the region of Times Square. Members of this brotherhood have the sparrow's licence to be impudent. They are ichthyophagous, living mainly on smoked sturgeon sandwiches; also, they are cannibalistic, and prey mercilessly upon one another. They are up to every trick, know all the answers, and believe in nothing but that which is most improbable or tenuous, such as hunches, forebodings, omens, dreams, colours, numbers, the Evil Eye, lucky pieces, Whammies, Double-Whammies, horoscopes, coincidences, jinxes and hexerei.

'If you think that this was a case of the mark conning the con, you're mistaken,' said Jonah the Moaner. 'Order me another little sandwich, and I'll tell you. . . .'

. . . It was back in 1924, son, before you were dry behind the ears (said Jonah the Moaner). My dearest friend betrayed me. I mean that two-timer, Keller the

Seller. I'd got hold of sixty cases of fine old Bourbon, but I was nervous about handling them; I didn't have any fall-money in case of trouble on either side of the law, which was prohibition then, and I like to keep the boys happy and quiet if I can. So I talk to my dearest friend, Keller, and he says:

'Jonah, let's make a deal. This winter weather gets my bronchitis. I'd like very much to make a piece of ready change, and bake it out where it's warm. Now I've got a fine private beach on the South Jersey coast – a thousand-foot of frontage, and it's no use to me in my present state. Let's trade, my beach for your liquor.'

Me being young and foolish, I like the idea of being a landowner. Besides, the Philadelphia Exposition is coming in 1926, and I see an opportunity somewhere or other. Cut a long story short, I make the swap, sight unseen, and Keller hands over the deeds and takes the Bourbon; and first chance I get, I go to Philly and ride out from there to Pennefex Point, which is fifty-five miles away.

When I get there I ask the driver, 'So where is it?' He points to a sort of a kind of a smear of slushy sandbar, and he says, 'That's it, mister, and next big wind we get there won't be that much, even.'

I realize, then, that not even your best friends can you trust. However, I was glad to hear that Keller sold my fine old Bourbon to Classical Joe Colaciecco for his speak.

I had siphoned off the real Bourbon and filled the bottles with wood alky cut with distilled water, and flavoured with syrup and coloured with iodine. Keller wasn't worth shooting, so Classical Joe made him drink

a whole bottle of the stuff and sent him to Bellevue that way.

Be sure your sins will find you out, is my philosophy.

So I wrote off Pennefex Point, but I kept the deeds – just in case, if you get what I mean. Well, a few weeks later I had to go to Philly again, to deliver a message for Thick Mick Ryan; and it is in the diner that I first meet up with this egg-faced fellow.

He was only about twenty-three years old then, and looking out of that window like a goldfish in a bowl. Dressed in a black coat and striped pants buttoned up to the chin and a stiff collar three inches high and so much too big for him that if he hiccuped he would cut his nose off. A black tie, and a black band around his arm, and even that didn't fit. Starched cuffs, mind you. A throw-back.

I like to be sociable, so I say, pointing to the armband, 'A bereavement, son? Some loved one passed on?'

He goes the colour of a plate of borscht with sour cream, and says, 'Oh yes, my uncle.'

I hate to be curious, but I like to know, so I ask, 'What of?' He says, 'An aneurysm of the aorta, sir; heart trouble.'

I hate a liar, but I like to cheer people up, so I tell him, 'Funny coincidence, that – I've got one of those myself.' After all, truth was made for man, not man for the truth. 'That's why I'm going to Philly, to settle up some affairs. Business,' I tell him. 'I can't be active much longer.'

'Why,' he says, 'I'm going there on business too. I've come all the way from England. My uncle's estate,' he says. 'He left me a lot of money. Fifteen thousand pounds – in dollars, of course—'

Seventy-five grand, I figure it up, because that's the sterling rate then.

'—So I thought I'd see Philadelphia,' says this egg; and he gives me a history of that burg that makes my eyes bug out. The Florence of America, he calls it, and the Athens of the West; got it all out of books – was an assistant librarian in a town called Bedford in England. 'I was thinking perhaps I might open a bookshop in Philadelphia,' he says, 'just a modest one.'

'Son,' I tell him, 'don't do it. A bookshop in Philly is crazy, but a modest one is plain madness. . . . And yet, putting books on one side, as it happens you've come to Philly at just the right time. A couple years from now comes the Exposition, and do you know what that means? It means that all of a sudden the whole world comes to the City of Brotherly Love—'

'What a charming name!'

'Sure, ain't it? But what's in a name? What's yours, by the way?' He says, 'Fantham. F. Fantham.' '*F* for Freddie?' I ask.

'No,' he says, blushing again, '*F* for Faithful. Our people have names like that. My late uncle's name was Endurance Fantham. We believe, hope and endure all things. My late mother's name was Hope, and my father's name was Credence.'

'I don't quite get this,' I say. 'Say somebody sold you some watered oil-stock?'

'If pure faith can turn water into wine, surely it can change water into oil?'

'Sure, but would you buy it even if you *knew* it was phony?'

'How *could* I know, being bound to believe?'

'Put it this way: say I asked you for a loan of a thousand dollars on my I.O.U and promised to pay it back next Monday, and you didn't know me from Adam?' He says, 'I'd be bound to believe you and lend you the money; not to do so would be to lack faith – but you were telling me about the Exposition, and I interrupted you.'

'The whole world will be there,' I says, 'and where are they going to sleep? All the hotels will be booked up at cut- throat rates a year ahead. Son, the crummiest flop-house in the Tenderloin will be getting the overflow of the carriage trade. They'll be sleeping in corridors, in bathtubs, on tables.

'Now I happen to own Pennefex Point, just a few miles out of the city. It's on the map. Right on the ocean. My idea was to put up as many cabins as I could and furnish 'em, and service 'em, and rent 'em – limousine service into Philly and back four times a day – refreshments, informal amusements; and quadruple my investment.

'Even a circulating library,' I said, 'only my doctor says no – my heart, my doctor says. My doctor says, "Jonah, would you rather live just comfortable, or die rich?" I say, "Doc, let me live till my dying day. I'll sell out Pennefex Point and take it easy." So that is what takes me to old Corrupt-and-Content – I mean, the City of Brotherly.'

'Love.'

'Yup. If I had my health and strength and a few bucks to invest . . . well, I've got a thousand foot of frontage at twenty bucks a foot going begging.' I tell this mark, 'I'd get my money back out of liquor alone.' He says, 'I understand it's illegal in America.'

So I tell him, 'Son, the law was made for man, not man

for the law; that's my motto. You can pass an Act saying it's illegal to breathe, but you can't enforce it. It's human nature. I'm a great lover of human nature.'

'True,' he says, 'the drug traffic is illegal, I believe, but my uncle Endurance sold drugs in the open streets of Philadelphia—' which surprises me until he explains his uncle had three drug stores, but I don't bother to inform the egg they are no less legit than chemists' shops where he came from. 'Many men, many minds,' he says. 'Do you really want to sell this land of yours?'

'I don't *want* to, but if I hang onto it I'm not likely to live to enjoy it,' I tell him with a long face, and I sigh like a blowout.

'I'll take it,' he says, dead calm.

'What, site unseen?'

'Why not? *I* have perfect faith, Mr Jonah.' And he takes out a new chequebook – Chemical Bank of Philadelphia – and a fountain-pen.

Now here's a funny thing: having sold myself so dead easy for more money than I've ever seen in a heap in my life before, all I want to do is *un*sell myself, so I make with a lip and say, 'Business ain't *done* like that, mister. There's the' deeds – I got 'em in my pocket, but they got to be made over to you by a lawyer. And you'll have to come to the bank with me – how do I know this cheque is okay?' He says, 'Certainly. Whatever you say, Mr Jonah.'

'You're nuts! How do you know this bit of beach you're buying is not under six inches of water at high tide?' I say, and he says, 'I'm confident it's all right.'

'I warn you—' What was coming over me? Pity, or shame, or what? I felt funny about this deal. '—I warn you, there's considerable erosion thereabouts. You'll have

to shore up the beach with a rock wall and throw out a couple, maybe three breakwaters; then there's the cost of the cabins and stuff, that'll set you back another ten, fifteen thousand dollars,' I say, and I'm not playing hard to get either; I'm sorry for little egg-face and his faith and all that stuff. 'I'll manage,' says he. Well, make your bed and lie on it is my motto.

Besides, say he does drop thirty, forty grand – he's still got a nice piece of change left. Matter of fact, it's lucky for him it's me he's dealing with. Many another character I know wouldn't of rested till he'd gotten the lot and let Faithful Fantham swim home. Cut a long story short, we run into Broad Street Station and go to the bank, and Fantham draws twenty grand in lovely new gold certificates, and then we go to a lawyer I know and get the deeds for Pennefex Point conveyed watertight – har-har! – one-two-three, and I take the money. The least I can do is buy a big dinner that night, but Fantham is so excited he can hardly eat; and curiously enough, I haven't got much of an appetite – I'm kind of let down, sort of depressed – and me with twenty grand in my pocket!

'I'll get someone to drive me out tomorrow,' he says, and then, 'I think I'll change the name of the place to Cape Faithful,' and, 'I think your steamed clams are delicious – perhaps I might open a fish restaurant on Pennefex Point.' I tell you, I was glad to get to bed, but I didn't sleep much. Fate! The finger of fate! That very night, there was one of these freak hurricanes like they get in them parts. It missed the city and rushed way out to sea, and then came back again behind a great big tidal wave that smashed down on to the South Jersey coast.

And all the time I'm trying to console myself with: 'At least poor little Fantham's got a very nice piece of change left.' In the end I had to pay the night clerk a pretty penny for a pint of rye, just to steady my nerves, though I'm not a drinking man. Well, next day I deliver my message to Thick Mick Ryan, who has his headquarters right opposite City Hll, and he gives me a slug of real Scotch and gets kind of friendly. 'Jonah,' he says, 'is it a fact that Keller the Seller sold you a bit of a sandbar called Pennefex Point?' 'It's a fact,' I say. 'Well, then, what would you call a price for it, now?' he asks. 'I've a good use for a nice bit of a beach on that coast.'

'Nice bit of a beach!' I say. 'Why, it's nothing more than a few shovelfuls of mud and stuff. Keller the Seller played me for a sucker.' 'I'll give you twenty G's for it,' says Thick Mick Ryan. I could only shake my head. 'Thirty,' he says.

'Mick,' I say, 'you don't know what you're talking about. After last night's storm there can't *be* any Pennefex Point. And anyhow, I sold it yesterday to some limey for twenty grand. I've been lying awake all night feeling sorry for him.'

'Save your sorrow for yourself,' says Ryan. 'It's a case of the farmer wins and the gambler loses, and the sucker's the wise guy after all. Luck o' the sea, me boy, luck o' the sea! Atlantic City's loss is Margate's gain, and vice versy. That big blow last night stripped off half a mile o' coast at Abednego away to the north, and that big wave dumped about half a million tons of it on Pennefex Point. So you've gone and sold the best beach in these parts for twenty grand! I'd have run to fifty . . . Hey, Trigger, give the man another drink – he's white as a sheet!'

. . . Yes, sure, I know I got twenty thousand dollars out of it. But Fantham got millions.

I passed that way five years later, and there was Pennefex Beach on Cape Faithful, neat as a pin, with smart little cabins, with lawns, with a Hotel Pennefex-Faithful – four hundred rooms – with a fishing-pier, boat-trips, a grocery, a drug-store. And Faithful Fantham's Gift Shoppe and Circulating Library. And a seafood restaurant that's famous.

You pity the Indians because they sold Manhattan Island for a hatful of beads. Am *I* nobody? . . . And this Faithful Fantham, I wonder, is he a man or a monster, which? For thirty-four years, now, he's been dogging my footsteps. There's something weirdy about that creep. All I have to do is get landed good and stuck with a load of something you couldn't pay somebody to take away, and up pops this Fantham to take it off my hands for whatever I ask. I can beat my brains out trying to figure what he's going to do with the junk – it's hopeless, it's useless, it's an encumbrance, it's not worth the matches to burn it – but he'll take it, and think of the one thing on God's green earth nobody else could have hit on in a hundred years.

Is it on account of he's simple-minded? Or is he a genius? Or both? Or what? Example: twenty years ago I swapped some spoiled linoleum for ten thousand genuine Japanese cultured pearls; only, when I came to look at them they weren't up to sample, they were no good, the kind even the Japs throw out, horrible-looking, muddy-coloured, bubbly, all sorts of loathsome shapes. I'd have been glad to get rid of them for ten for a dime, or a penny apiece.

But who'll buy? While I'm brooding, trying to figure a way out, having a sturgeon sandwich in Mendeloff's one night, Fantham comes in – delighted to see me, the jerk; calls me his 'benefactor' which makes it somehow ten times worse. And why am I so downhearted? So I tell him straight out, 'I am trying to unload ten thousand no-good cultured pearls, and it's no use you bidding for them, because if these things look like pearls, then gallstones are jewellery. 'How much?' he asks. I get that sinking feeling again, but I say, 'Twenty-five cents apiece.' Out comes that chequebook, personalized already, Faithful Fantham Inc. – Inc., yet! – and he says, 'Ten thousand at twenty-five cents is two thousand five hundred dollars, I believe?'

Also, he asks, for a favour will I deliver them tomorrow to the hotel he is staying at? So, after laying awake all night worrying what he's going to do with ten thousand bum pearls, I carry the whole lot over to the St Regis where this specimen has got a millionaire's suite – tea he's drinking with English muffins and kippered herrings and marmalade, in a black silk robe with a monogram like Dracula – and I ask what's he going to do with these here pearls? He says, 'I don't quite know, yet, but I have every confidence; I've never had anything but good fortune in my dealings with you.' 'Any good fortune comes out of this load of junk, I'll be surprised,' I tell him, 'and don't say I didn't warn you.' He says, 'You've always been honest with me.' . . . And the funny thing is, I have – in spite of myself. God knows I never meant to be.

Well, next thing I see is some of Fantham's Honest John ads in the Resort Sections of all the New York papers: it seems there are pearls in some of his oysters, 'intrinsically valueless' the ad says, 'but curious' and from

September to the end of April there's a sort of competition in his famous seafood restaurant, free for all: $2000 in cash for whoever gets most pearls, second prize $1000, third prize $500, $500 in consolation prizes and keep the pearls. The one thing I didn't think of!

Again, take that time I'm stuck with a load of canned dog-food, all strictly okay but dogs won't eat it, and Dicky Dreyfus is stuck with a load of sardines, likewise okay but people won't eat 'em in such repulsive cans, they being forgotten in a cellar for twenty-five years. Just for luck, we swap, and there I am with 500 gross cans of sardines, without labels and what cans! –battered, rusty, so bad I wouldn't offer them to my worst enemy if he left me a million dollars in his will. So I'm at this very table thinking, should I open 'em all and repack 'em in gallon jars and call 'em guano for fertilizing tropical plants, when I feel a shiver up my back.

It's that man again. He says, 'I guessed I might find you here – and how is the world using you, old friend?' I say, 'Want to buy 500 gross lousy sardines for thirty bucks a gross? But listen, you can't sell these sardines. They're old, they're horrible!' He writes me a cheque for fifteen grand, and he says with tears in his eyes, 'Jonah, you have always been the embodiment of honesty!' Such talk takes the guts out of you.

I went away wondering what he springs this time, dead certain the Food and Drugs boys get him if he puts them sardines on the market. Well, it seems there was some French Baron – the type who write books about omelets, or all of a sudden they discover herrings, or something – a gourmet living on the cuff, writing about frogs, snails, salted grasshoppers for the slickie magazines; monocle and

a goatee; and he tells Fantham there is nothing more exquisite and harder to find than a 'vintage' sardine. Just as certain types of gentlemen lay down wine for twenty years, so certain other types make a cellar of Portuguese sardines. So my 'vintage' sardines they put up in little glass jars, complete with instructions to spread them on hot buttered toast – $1.25 per jar, which amounted to half a large can, and not more than two jars per customer in view of the limited supply! 144,000 jars at $1.25 per jar, work it out; and his total outlay, including my lousy fifteen grand, not over $30,000!

Then I had my first nervous breakdown. The croaker said take it easy, but how can a man take it easy without he's got his self-respect? And that Fantham had undermined me, gnawed me away like a termite, so I says to myself, 'Jonah, get the better of this, this, this Frankenstein only once, and retire to Miami Beach with your shirt outside your pants.' Well, just about then I got a load of TV tubes, some okay, but mostly so-so. These I swap with Myer the Liar for a consignment specified as German Army Surplus Surgical Supplies, Opthalmic, Various, which turned out to be two hundred thousand glass eyes, and the 'Various' means they're all different shapes and sizes and colours, mass-produced, spoiled in the factory, rejects and unfinished.

So I'm having a snack and a cup of coffee, wondering if I can't make them up into costume jewellery or, maybe, religious texts for the Bible Belt – *Thou God Seest Me,* and all that – when I feel a sort of lump in my stomach and bugs-like between the shoulders. Without looking up, I say, 'You again, Boris Karloff?' – and Fantham sits down, all smiles, so with a sinking feeling I tell him, 'I got two

hundred thousand glass eyes.' He says, 'How much, old friend?' To anyone else I'd say, 'Two hundred bucks,' but to Fantham I say, 'A nickel apiece.' Out comes the chequebook. I grab his wrist, saying, 'Fantham, they're rejects, no two the same shape, some got little bubbles, some are bright red – terrible-looking! – ain't even fit for eccentric costume jewellery.' Bless you for your straightforwardness,' says this Fantham, smiling like an angel, damn him. 'Let me see, 200,000 nickels is $10,000, I believe? Jonah, why are you always so kind to me?' he says, kind of affectionate.

I can't find any words; grab the cheque and run, and it takes a glass of brandy to pull me together. Still, I think to myself, I think. 'Surely, I got that reptile this time!' So, about a month later I run into Stick-at-Nothing Sam Citron, who operates a kind of insurance business, looking irritated and he says, 'Jonah, I always thought I was a man of ideas. You know me, Jonah, I always set such perfect fires my clients are bound to collect on their policies – and still I'm driving a 1955 model car. Well, the other day a character that butter wouldn't melt in his mouth walks into Head Office of the biggest company, with an idea a child of ten might think of, and walks out with fifty thousand smackers!'

'How come?' I say, and he says, 'Well, you know they insure big industrial plants on account Workmen's Compensation, and so forth? Well, in steel plants and such, where they work on lathes, etcetera, there's a hell of a lot of casualties with eyes because fellows forget to put goggles on, or take 'em off to see better, or what-have-you. Sooner or later, a splinter of steel in somebody's eye, and compensation; so, of course, the insurance people put out

leaflets about wearing goggles, but who takes notice? But this fellow, he has a neat little card printed, saying:

WEAR GOGGLES —
IF YOU DON'T WANT THIS!

and glued underneath, a deformed sort of glass eye. He sold 'em 200,000 at a quarter apiece,' said Sam Citron.

Everything went black; I had a stroke. Wouldn't you?

. . . Jonah the Moaner ordered another cup of coffee, and said moodily, 'Once upon a time I was a sceptic – didn't believe in magic and stuff – the slickest hustler on Broadway, a happy man, I was respected and I respected myself. I still am respected for turning into ready money junk you'd have to pay the city to cart away, but here in my, please excuse the language, here in my breast I know I'm nothing but a nothing. That escapee from a horror-movie on 42nd Street has got me: the boys think I'm smart and I know I'm not; I'm undermined!'

I said, 'But you've made a pretty little fortune out of this man Fantham—'

'—Aah, be quiet when you talk about things you don't understand,' said Jonah. 'It's a matter of principle. This time, I'll get him; only stand by and give me a little moral support.' And then Faithful Fantham came into the café.

At close quarters he did not look like a vampire, or a ghoul, or a monster; only good-natured, somewhat silly, egg-shaped about the head, pear-shaped in body and dressed in formal black like a senior clerk in an old-established City of London lawyer's office. He shook hands with Jonah, upon whose face was written a sort of waxy desperation; you see such an expression only on a gambler whose last penny is on the last unlikely card in a blackjack game

– he must play, and he must lose. When we were introduced, Fantham shook my hand effusively and cried, 'You must visit me, be my guest for as long as you can bear it. A suite or a cabaua – anything you want, anything! You must promise. . . . And you Jonah, old friend, I've given up hope of you. . . . Nothing will get him away from his noisy old Broadway.'

Pushing away his cup, Jonah said, 'Get me a brandy, Fantham; I got that funny feeling inside' – and while the waiter was bringing it, he continued in a queer, somnambulistic monotone – 'Fantham, do you want some wallpaper? I got two million feet.' Fantham asked, 'How much?' Jonah the Moaner turned to me and said, 'You see?' Then, in a strangled voice, he said, 'A penny a foot!' Fantham took out a leather-covered chequebook and a gold fountain pen, saying, 'That would make twenty thousand dollars, I think?'

Jonah, sweating with some nameless emotion, caught Fantham's hand and shouted, 'No! Stop! Listen! It is, and it ain't – I mean to say, it's out of the old mills at Pluto, Massachusetts, and it ain't in rolls; it's books of old samples. You know, they used to put out great big books of 500 pages or more, two feet long by eighteen inches wide, to distribute to the decorators all over the country, and what I got is, forty-five years' sample-books, over 2000 of 'em. The real stock was sold off weeks ago. This stuff is strictly junk!'

'I'll take it,' said Fantham, pushing over the cheque. 'Don't blame me—' Jonah began, but Fantham cut him short, saying, 'My dear friend Jonah, I owe you nothing but gratitude.' He turned to me. 'Thanks to Mr Jonah, I've been able to complete my hospital, my school and my

boys' summer camp. He is a very fine man.' 'Good *night*,' said Jonah and, putting on his hat back-to-front, he walked out. Politely excusing himself, Fantham followed him.

I never saw either of them again, but several months later, riding into New York from an outlying suburb, I casually picked up an abandoned copy of a Sunday newspaper folded back at the Obituaries page. There, prominently displayed, was a photograph of Faithful Fantham, together with about three hundred words of quite ardent notice of his benevolence, his philanthropies, his uncanny business acumen and his unalterable integrity.

He had died peacefully in his sleep in the small hours of Friday, 4 July, at the early age of fifty-eight. I wondered what Jonah the Moaner would have to say to this, and went to Mendeloff's Café that very afternoon, but Jonah was not there. I asked after him, and one of his friends, some trickster in the real estate business, said:

'Funny thing about Jonah. The other night I come up to him to have a chat, and he's eating a sturgeon sandwich as usual, and I got under my arm a copy of that shiny magazine called *Chatelaine*, all about how to make your house unique and all that stuff. Well, he gets hold of this magazine for a free look, and flips it open at a double-page spread of the latest style in interior decorating. It seems a guy called Jean Sazerac, working out of Pennefex, has turned out the one and only vogue that is guaranteed one hundred per cent unique, impossible to imitate, the Patchwork Quilt Design. No two walls, let alone no two rooms, can be quite the same; and it sets you back one thousand dollars per wall, and heiresses and what-not from all over

the country scream their heads off for it. I thought it would amuse Jonah – but what does he do?

'He gets up and knocks over his coffee, and he grabs up a handful of his shirt, and goes a horrible colour like an old lead pipe, and his lips go purple and he says something like "The Phantom wins at last!" I say, "You been readin' too many funnies, or what?" But he don't answer; just passes on with a gurgle. And that's all there is to it.'

I asked, 'When was this?'

'Last Friday, the Glorious Fourth, about one in the morning.'

'What did he die of?'

'Something they call an aortic aneurysm. Why?'

I said, 'He told Faithful he had one thirty-four years ago, when he was sound as a bell. . . . *Whatever that man believed in had to come true!*'

'What are you talking about?'

'Nothing,' I said. And thanking God that Jonah the Moaner had not been a science fantasy writer, I went home.

Perfect Camera

By sheer good fortune, when I got lost one misty evening – trying to find my way to a place called Strood in Kent, I saw a light in the window of a pleasant little house and, there being no human being in sight, made bold to knock at the door and ask my direction. I observed that there was an ancient brass plate under the knocker, bearing the inscription: J. Hilton-Joyce, L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S. This, evidently, was the house of the village doctor.

A little old gentleman opened the door. I noticed that he was wearing a velvet smoking-jacket of obsolete cut and a tasselled smoking-cap such as I had not seen since my grandfather's day.

He looked at me sternly. 'Sorry, not in practice,' he said. 'Try Dr Minnow, Vail Road, three miles up—' He added anxiously, 'Unless it's a really desperate emergency; in which case, come in and I'll telephone. In any case, come in before we both catch our deaths in this infernal mist. Warm yourself; have a hot drink. Where's the trouble?'

I said, 'You're very kind, sir. I will, if I may. But I

didn't come for medical attention; I came to ask my way to Strood.'

'Oh goodness gracious, you've gone astray, indeed! You are seven bad miles out of your direction, young man, and the mist getting thicker. You'll never walk it. Take off your hat and coat. Sit by the fire. Warm yourself through.'

'Could I, perhaps, telephone for a car?'

'Not a dog's chance, sir, of getting one. What the devil possessed you to walk to Strood in this weather? Or any other weather? No no, that is none of my business. Now, sit ye down. Try the leather chair. The kettle's on the hob. I was about to treat myself to a whisky toddy.' He was busying himself, now, with glasses and lemon and sugar.

He peeled the lemon with an old-fashioned scalpel with an ivory handle, and it was a pleasure to see him do it. He got the aromatic part of the skin off in a beautiful spiral thin as tissue-paper; put it aside in a glass dish, and then went on to remove the pith, never once breaking the delicate membrane which encloses the juicy fruit.

I said to him, 'You must have been a remarkable surgeon in your time, sir.'

He could not quite hide his pleasure at the compliment, but tried to shrug it off with, 'In my time? Do you know how long ago my time was? I've been retired this thirty years. Yes, sir, I was one of the good old materialistic Edinburgh school. Studied my surgery under M'Kechnie – only no ambition. Lazy. Industrious by fits and starts. Can you guess how old I am?'

'About sixty-odd, sir?'

'Eighty-five. I come from these parts. I was general practitioner for a little while in London. Was born under this

roof. When my father died and left me a modest competence and this property, I came down here to browse and drowse my life away. Although sometimes it gets lonely, especially this misty time of the year. The mist, it gets into the marrow of your bones and gives you the creeps. I'm glad to have your company tonight.'

I said, 'I must admit there is something scarey about this mist. It reminds one of ghosts.'

'Sir, I do not scare, and I do not believe in ghosts. I never saw one. I am a pragmatical man of the good old Edinburgh school, and have yet to be convinced of the existence of hob-goblins, witches, flibbertigibbets, magic, the Evil Eye, and so forth.'

'Evil is in the eye of the beholder,' I remarked.

This pleased him. He said, 'There you talk sense! Before your time, when I was practising in London, I treated one such. Did you ever hear of Manxman the photographer?'

'I can't say I ever did,' I said.

The old doctor unlocked a secretaire and took out a faded photograph. 'What do you think of this?' he asked, handing it to me.

It was a face out of a nightmare. Its predominant expressions were indolent cruelty, sly lust, latent savagery, and swinish greed most curiously blended in a look of odious shyness. Every feature seemed to be, somehow, a hair's breadth out of place. It was not merely subtly and hideously malformed – it was all wrong. It was evil.

Observing my expression, my genial old host chuckled and repeated, 'What do you think of that?'

'I should hate to meet a man with a face like that on a night like this,' I answered, swallowing hard.

'And who do you think it is, eh?'

'I don't know, but I hope he's hanged by now,' I said.

'Well, I'll tell you who it's supposed to be. That, sir, is Manxman's impression of *me*, taken with his so-called Enchanted Camera. And how do you like that?'

He took back the photograph, replaced it in its envelope, and put it in its drawer, saying, 'I don't care to have it framed. It upsets people. But as you say, evil is in the eye of the beholder. Why, man, you look all white about the gills! Have another toddy.'

'Who the devil was this Manxman?' I asked.

'Give me your glass and I'll tell you,' said Dr Hilton-Joyce, and so he went on to tell me . . .

It may not be in your line of business, sir, but I have always noticed something peculiar about microscopists, men wholly involved in microscopy. It seems to me that they are neither in nor out of this world. They get into trouble, of course. Look at Galileo. Yes, I know, he made a telescope. But if it were not for this confounded mist and you could see the stars, Galileo's telescope would be in point of fact nothing but a microscope in reverse, bringing the macrocosm within scope of the microcosm.

Let us not be obscure. Consider the case of the philosopher, Spinoza, a lens-grinder, who tried to bring the universe closer. All he got for it was a bad chest through crystal dust.

And this fellow Manxman – he, also, started as a grinder of optical lenses, specifically for scientific purposes. He made a microscope for Pasteur. Manxman, also, got short sight and a bad chest.

But in his way Manxman was a genius.

Half-blind, he could *feel* a refractive index or an angle of parallax. Upon my word, that fellow could almost smell and taste the quality of light! He worked as an apprentice seven years for Plafon in Paris, and as journeyman for another five. Then – it might have been crystal dust again – something went wrong with his eyes.

The great Louis Pasteur delivered him out of the hands of butchers like me, and kept him in the dark, very simply, until Manxman could see again. Vision distorted? Very likely. But vision of a sort. He went to work, half by touch, and made himself a pair of spectacles. Then, back to his bench with everything clear after all those years of shadow.

At about this time men of the calibre of Lumière were experimenting with moving pictures.

The American, George Eastman, was mass-producing his little picture-boxes – I believe there was some trouble, some lawsuit with a clergyman concerning the shutter? I forget.

Well, it worked out like this: Manxman, back into the light after years of the mist and twilight such as you have got lost in this very evening – and after I don't know how long in the absolute dark – decided to build the perfect camera. Now, as you must know, a lens-grinder, even then, could command a high wage. Necessarily so, poor devil, because his lease was short.

No breach of professional confidence – the man has been dead fifty years, and no issue. Yet, for about a year, he could have had – I hate the expression – any woman he liked, although he was not much to look at. This, you understand, is an understatement; but I come from the

old school where we were accustomed to moderate our statements.

He was ugly in a sickly way, poor Manxman. His chest had fallen in, he acquired a spinal curvature, and in his face a horrid rictus. His hair was long, and his linen dingy. Since he could not shave himself and hated barbers, poor Manxman had a beard, very long and wispy; and those extraordinary pebble-crystals he had ground for himself magnified his eyes out of all proportion. And all the time he coughed.

Well, as I was saying, he set up a little workshop to make the perfect camera. He said to me, 'With these glasses of mine I can see with something like clarity, Doctor. But people are liars, inveterate liars unto themselves. The sensitized plate tells the truth – the camera does not lie. Wait, and I will make you a lens that will photograph your very soul!'

Always of a contentious habit – I think I mentioned that I belong to the good old Edinburgh school – I said to him, 'Man, you are out of your wits. You're fey. Define me "soul", is all I ask. What is it? Where is it? Have you ever seen a soul? If so, draw me a bit diagram. Get yourself a wee studio and pull your black velvet over your head and make pictures of young ladies holding bunches of wax grapes. Let me look after your chest. The soul is beyond my jurisdiction – and yours, too.'

Manxman said, 'Have it your way. Edinburgh doctors have no souls – only characters. But two weeks hence I will show you a photograph of yourself as you *are*. You wait and see!'

So I said to him, 'Manxman, I am an old-fashioned pragmatist. The great M'Kechnie—'

He cut me off short with, 'Damn the great M'Kechnie! Come back in ten days, all nice and ready to sit for your portrait, and I'll show you what you really *are*.'

So I came back – apart from professional visits – and there he was with his camera all mounted – a thing like a concertina on a tripod. What seemed to be the basic part of the apparatus was, let us say, about the size of half of the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia*. Out in front protruded something like an exaggerated tulip-vase, but covered with washleather. Above, the kind of aperture-sight they used to have on machine-guns. A formidable apparatus, sir.

To cut a long story short, Manxman set me in a chair, told me to relax – which I did – and pressed a little jigger at the end of a tube. Then he took out the plate and ran with it into his darkroom, grinning like an ape . . .

I waited an hour, and he came out with the monstrosity I've just shown you, saying, 'This is your*self*!'

I looked at it and said, 'There is something wrong with your glasses, my friend. This is neither me nor anybody else. First, let me give you a sedative. Then we'll see a reliable optician.' But he persisted that he had photographed my innermost soul.

I said to him, 'Man, I would not own such a soul, innermost or outermost – although I will concede that the outlines are clear.'

He called me a fool, and smashed the plate – they used to be made of glass in those days – but I kept that print as a curio, and did my professional duty by him with my little ear-trumpet. Now, no doubt, an electrocardiogram

of poor Manxman would come out like boom and depression or, say, a map of the Himalayas. He was not in elegant shape, poor fellow.

He would not see me again for a long time. But I heard of him. It was a transvaluation of values, then. I was in general practice in Bentinck Street. Manxman had a studio in Bond Street. I was making my way, in my lazy way; but he was the talk of the town. He was in the newspapers. There was an article about him in *The Westminster Gazette* in which he was described as 'the mirror of the soul', and another in *The Globe* that represented him as a veritable Svengali and spoke of his 'Enchanted Camera'.

For a little while he was extremely fashionable. You know how it is? A woman will lap up your flattery and inhale your incense as a matter of course – I don't say without pleasure – but at the back of her mind lies the unspoken question: What does he really think of me? It became the vogue for Society ladies to consult Manxman as to the true appearance of their hidden hearts. None of these pictures was published in the illustrated magazines. Most of them were destroyed, I believe.

Yet it may be that Manxman did his modicum of good – as much as is vouchsafed. To tell you the truth, I believe some of these sitters of his gloated over Manxman's distortions of them. He was responsible for a certain change of expression in Society in 1903. He invented the drooped eyelid and replaced the prim mouth with the snarl and the leer. Always, some little bit of the face was in the wrong place – as, I repeat, the leer, the snarl, the sneer, the look of illicit desire curiously combined with disdain

and self-hate. He was, I suppose, the progenitor of what they used to call the 'vamp'.

I ran into him in a tailor's shop in Savile Row – I allowed myself two good suits per annum, and was getting myself fitted for what they used to call a body coat, in other words, a professional frock-coat. He was feeling the finest facecloth in jet black, and wore a peculiar kind of jacket suit that buttoned up to the sternum, where it opened to reveal a black silk waistcoat with peculiar little lapels.

His linen, now, was white as driven snow, and he wore a cravat of the finest satin, not tied but held in place by a silver ring set with an enormous cat's-eye. His beard and his hair were trimmed. He must have been a difficult subject for a tailor to fit, because he seemed to stoop more than ever. His complexion was like lead. I said to myself, 'Oho, my friend, the cardiac will not be denied!'

But I said to him, 'How goes it, Manxman? I hear you're photographing souls at last.'

'So I am, Doctor,' said he. 'And where are you these days?'

I said, 'In practice in Bentinck Street.'

He became slightly condescending then, because Bentinck Street was to Harley Street – or even Queen Anne Street – a species of poor relation.

Manxman said, 'I have my studio in Bond Street, and my chambers above.'

He looked at me with all the arrogance in the world magnified to satanic proportions through those eyeglasses of his, so that I understood why he had received such diabolic publicity: one felt that the miserable fellow was stooping to swoop and that there were bat's wings tucked

away where his scapulae – or, as the vulgar put it, shoulder-blades – should have been. At any moment he might give a great flap and carry you off to a mountain top, and invite you to cast yourself down, etcetera.

But all he said was, 'Doctor, I owe you for four visits at three and sixpence a time. That makes fourteen shillings. Allow me to settle—' and paid into my hand a golden half-sovereign and two half-crowns. I gave him a shilling change, which he put up in a leather purse shaped like a saddle, and said, 'Let us go and have tea at Bunter's.'

Having no calls until evening, I went with him. Bunter's used to be the finest teashop in the world. Ah me, those were the days! But why should I repine? Even if I had my youth and appetite, could I bring old times back? To proceed: I ordered finnan haddie seethed in milk, with a poached egg to top it off, and hot buttered crumpets. Manxman had a cup of tea and a biscuit. He said, with some irritation, 'Did you have no lunch, Doctor?'

I told him, yes, certainly, a light lunch: a potato soup and a couple of veal cutlets, merely. But I would make up for it at dinner-time.

'I didn't know G.P.s in Bentinck Street did themselves so well,' says he, looking askew at me – 'silk hat and all.'

'A silk hat, my friend, is a thing to keep a stethoscope in. Anyway, with my practice and my natural inclination to indolence, I should most likely be renewing my wardrobe off the hook in Whitechapel. Only I have come into a little inheritance.'

'Yes,' says Manxman, 'it was written all over your face. You were born idle and greedy and vicious and vain. Couldn't you see it in the photograph I took of you?'

'I did not regard it,' I tell him, mopping up the last of

the yolk of the egg with the residue of the last crumpet. 'I keep the picture, yes. But believe me, Manxman, your popularity is nothing but a fad. It will pass. It must pass. One good cold blast will kill it. To make hay while the sun shines is every man's prerogative.

'Just now people are rich and silly. A day will come when they'll say, "Why should I pay this fellow Manxman fifty guineas for what I could get for twopence in the Hall of Mirrors on Hampstead Heath?" Save your money, man; salt it down; wear a velveteen jacket like any other photographer, and don't go squandering ten guineas on a Savile Row suit!'

But he was paying little attention to me. He kept flipping open and snapping shut a fine gold watch, and looking uneasily in the direction of the door.

'Expecting somebody?' I ask him.

He says 'To be frank, a lady. A very beautiful lady. I hope to marry her, Doctor.'

I shuddered, I will confess, at the thought of what poor Manxman might consider beautiful; but he goes on, rummaging in his wallet, 'The only beautiful woman these eyes have ever seen, Doctor. Here is a picture of her – head and shoulders. I took it myself.'

And he hands me, with a certain reverence, one of those little photographs that used to be known, I believe, as cartes de visite: they used to put them out by the thousand and sell them, so much a piece – Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Terry, Eleanora Duse, and what have you. Happy days when we were young, eh?

I hesitate, you understand, to look at this picture. A man, distorted, is bad enough; but to the male eye a woman distorted is ten times worse.

Then you can imagine my surprise when I see the portrayal of a kind of angel – not unlike George du Maurier's Trilby – symmetrical, perfect, sublime! 'What? Are you trying to tell me that this lovely woman entertains any idea of marrying the likes of you?' I ask him.

And Manxman, with a smug smile, says, 'We are engaged. Aha, that shakes you, does it? Yes, sir, we are engaged to be married. And she worships the very ground that I tread on. Jealous?'

'To put it mildly, astounded,' I tell this miserable fellow for whom – in parenthesis – I have conceived a certain distaste, all pity spent.

'She will be here any moment,' says he, squinting at his loud gold watch. 'Have another cup of tea. Let's order a fresh pot. And muffins – Martha loves muffins. . . . Hey there!' he shouts, like the pilot of a boat in a fog, 'Fresh tea, hot and strong! And muffins, plenty of muffins!' Then, 'Keep calm, Doctor – here she comes.'

I ask him, 'Here who comes?'

'My Martha.'

I need scarcely tell you that I am ready to spring out of my chair like a jack-in-the-box; but I pull down my cuffs and rise like a gentleman to greet this peerless beauty whose photograph lies before me on the table. And what do I see?

Heaven help us, I have no words for it! Say, everything the photograph was not. The very thought of it gives me a funny turn. She was all out of place, let us put it like that. As a medical man I could give you some reasons for her weird malformation; but not all. There is no use going into details. She was a horror.

So be it. The tea and the muffins came, and I civilly lifted that picture out of the way – whereupon this Martha gives out a little cry and says to me, 'Oh, Dr Hilton-Joyce, has that wicked man been showing you my portrait? Do you think he does me justice?'

What can I say? I can only say, 'I am no judge of these matters, ma'am, but it is a very pretty picture.'

'Don't you think Arthur is a fine-looking man?' she asks me.

I say, 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I am only a dry medical man of the old Edinburgh school.'

She gushes, this appalling woman, like that geyser they call Old Reliable, 'Oh, make him, Doctor – make him take a photo of himself for me to carry. Oh please, dear Doctor, please!'

Now a child of ten can see that Manxman has a sort of double-barrelled vanity: he is vain of himself, and vain of his low opinion of himself. In between the two, such a fellow visualises a species of god – be it Apollo, be it Vulcan; it does not matter.

So when he hesitates, I put in my oar and I say, 'Come on now, Manxman. You claim to have photographed other people's souls. Play the man, and let us have a glimpse of your own.'

You see, he really had come to believe in his own chicanery, miserable fellow, and took his spiritualistic photograph-taking very seriously, this lens-grinder with dust in his eyes.

But on my challenge, with Martha clinging to his arm, he says, 'Very well, and so I will. I've never done it before, but there must be a first time for everything. And if it will give you pleasure, Martha, I'll take a cabinet photo-

graph of myself at about eight feet. No gig-lamps—' by which, of course, he meant spectacles – 'I can extend the cord and rig the camera, my dear, and by the middle of tomorrow I'll have a fine print for you to put in a silver frame.'

This infatuated and malformed but good-hearted and affectionate woman, holding a buttered muffin in one hand, pinched his cheek with the other, and said, 'You're so good! And will you bring out your soul?'

'Naturally,' says he.

Beauty, etcetera, are in the eye of the beholder . . . Oh aye, I will grant you that. But did anybody ever stop to consider the nature of the eye, and the beholder?

In a scientific way I was, in a manner of speaking, interested. This creature Manxman had managed, with his wonky goggles and his queer lenses, to turn Society beauties into harpies, and statesmen into gargoyles. You have seen what he did with me – it made you sick to look at it, did it not? So it did me. Yet, on the other hand, his queer eyes and his queer camera, brought to bear on that intolerably contorted Martha of his, had thrown up the picture of a beauty.

I was exceedingly curious – curiosity having got the upper hand of sympathy – to observe what this little monster would make of himself. So I made an appointment with him for the following afternoon, saying that I wanted to examine his chest, anyway.

I turned up at three with my little black bag, and the house-keeper's husband says to me, 'Doctor, thank God you've come – Mr Manxman is taken bad. I'll let you in.'

And there was Manxman, propped up on pillows, with a stone hot-water bottle at his feet. I say to him, 'Bear up,

man, and let's have a listen at your silly old chest.' But I can see in his face that he is done for. 'Have you been overdoing it, or what has upset you?'

He says in a faint voice, 'You encouraged her, you. You know I could photograph the actual person with my camera, although you pretend and pretend and pretend. . . . I never wanted an image of myself. But that woman asked for it, and you bolstered her up, curse you!'

I am an old-fashioned Edinburgh man, and I don't believe in curses, so I tell him plainly, 'Be calm, you fool, and I'll give you a dose of something that will be good for what ails you. Meanwhile, what happened to you? You were to take your own picture. You know, photograph your true likeness. What's to do with it? Where have you hid it? I don't hold with your souls and your spirits and your images, Manxman, but I am curious to know how you saw yourself through those queer goggles and that peculiar lens.'

It is what they call patter, because while I am administering certain necessary drugs I am listening as his breath comes shorter, and he says, 'You never believed, but I know. No time to discuss now. Oh, why did you let me take a picture of myself?'

I tell him, 'Man, a man who is afraid of himself is no man. Let's have a look at the photograph.'

'It's under the pillow,' he says, 'but you mustn't show it to *her*.'

Oh well, I feel under the pillow and fish out the photograph of something which was truly frightening. The face was not so much hairy as bristly, and the eyes were bulgy and protuberant in the wrong direction. There were no visible ears, but there was a sort of nose – or rather, pro-

boscis. It was impossible to associate this thing with humanity.

I had to look twice before a certain thought struck me, and I asked, 'Did you have your glasses on, Manxman, when you took this photograph?'

'Naturally not. I arranged the camera and sat back. My glasses would throw back the light, so I took them off. Believe me, I know how to make people sit, and so I sat for my own portrait while I pressed the trigger. And there is my soul – oh dear me!'

I asked, 'At what distance, when you took your glasses off?'

'Oh, between eight and ten feet.'

Then I began to laugh, looking at the photograph, and I said, 'Why, you blind booby, don't you know what you've done? It's as simple as ABC.

'Listen to me carefully. Without your glasses on, you got yourself out of alignment and, very simply, took a distorted picture of the head of a common housefly. So cheer up and try it again.'

But I was talking into space; Manxman would never try anything again . . .

Oh dear, this was a long time ago, and the mist gives me the creeps. . . . For you see, there are no flies in December. With your kind permission, I'll give you a shakedown by the fire, and bid you good night.

The Pug and The Angel

Perhaps someone who is interested in the history of the American theatre between 1840 and 1890 owns a photograph of Penitence Twatchman, either alone or in the back row of a group of celebrities. I have never seen one. Really, for a man so completely dedicated to the stage, he seems to have been remarkably shy of personal publicity. No doubt he had his reasons: one wife too many, or even some little matter of misappropriation – who knows? His name, as Charles Dickens remarked with some envy, *was* rather too good to be true. One comes upon the merest mention of him here and there, in an old letter or an unimportant diary. It is quite likely that he was the person whom Junius Brutus Booth scornfully called 'dear old Dollaper Day' – referring, perhaps, to the rates Penitence Twatchman charged when he was in the theatrical costume business.

He was always, both figuratively and literally, a man behind the scenes. In the theatre things really do tend to happen more dramatically than elsewhere, and with a

certain artificially-lighted, over-shaded, stagily-contrived continuity. Here one feels that if one passed a wet sponge over the face of life, it would stand starkly revealed as something seedy, furtive and much the worse for wear. There are always missing bridge-sequences. One day, having got into the business God knows how, the man who lends you your costume lends you a few dollars; then, to secure his loan, and having some influence with the managers, he finds you some work; having done which, he takes ten per cent of your pay and becomes an agent. After that, it may be that he has a finger in every pie. He tells the dramatist what to write, he tells the actress how much leg to show, he tells the critics what to say. But he is seldom the Theatrical Figure with the Personality; he hires people to smoke the cigars, wear the carnations and play the devil with the girls. No, he is generally a quiet, greying man, a micrographer in contractual small type, who knows all the loop-holes in the law of averages.

Whatever he was really like, it is certain that Penitence Twatchman appealed to at least three great authors of his time as 'worth using', which is what we say in the trade of a character that can be made conspicuously comic, or villainous or benevolent, without too much hard writing; but, somehow, their quite different impressions of the man convey a single image of someone pursy-bodied, glossily bald, ruddy and eagerly pouting. He irritated Mark Twain, whom he accosted in the street some time after Ulysses S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* had been published. 'Your house, Mr Clemens, sir,' he said, 'has put out a work that is fraught with interest, and I am much mistaken if it fails to net General Grant's inconsolable widow half a million dollars. But, sir, did General Grant ever

really *live*? Whom, sir, did he *meet*, of general interest? What did he *achieve*, sir? Now had I but the time—' Mark Twain said, '—Now had you but! But you haven't. Neither, as luck will have it, have I. Good day to you.' And he wrote this note in his pocket-book: *Penitence Twatchman, known in the theatre as 'Percentage'. An old rogue with a red, glazed, pot-bellied kind of face and lips like an ever open beak. He looks like a coffee-pot that has swallowed its own spout. Hope it chokes him.* Yet, twenty-odd years earlier, Charles Dickens had written of Penitence Twatchman: . . . *Expression like that of a very benevolent little pig, roasted to a turn, begging Mankind with tears in his eyes to pop an apple in his mouth and dish him up before he gets cold.* And, at the same time, William Makepeace Thackeray decided that Twatchman looked *like a jolly little copper kettle just about to sing.*

The lonely, genteel Thackeray had a certain sympathetic feeling for foot-loose adventurers; corseted as he was in the stays of Victorian formality, he secretly envied the type of unlaced, gaudy rascal which he believed Penitence Twatchman to be. True, he could not walk through Covent Garden to the Garrick Club without rubbing elbows with a score of home-grown characters vastly more shady or lurid, but the portly, prosperous little American seems to have caught his fancy: *Penitence Twatchman* – the name alone was worth a story in *Punch,* but Thackeray never wrote it. Twatchman had been introduced to Thackeray by Dickens, whom he was trying to tempt with an unheard-of sum of money, to break his contract with his publishers, stop writing *Great Expectations* and come to America on a theatrical tour; for, in addition to being

the most popular writer of his day, Dickens was a superb character actor.

There must have been a little malice in Dickens's foisting him off on Thackeray, for the urbane author of *Vanity Fair*, though easy enough among friends, produced a disagreeably irritating effect upon a large audience, who saw nothing but a shambling, awkward, near-sighted man with a badly-broken nose and a voice like a bagpipe with only one note. There always was a certain bad feeling between the two novelists. But if Dickens had hoped somehow to embarrass his rival, he must have been disappointed; Thackeray conceived for Penitence Twatchman one of his typical 'affections' which, like matches, would strike anywhere, flare up and go out, all in a second. Thus, they had a night out together – the night of the glorious seventeenth of April, 1860, after the English champion Tom Sayers and the American champion John C. Heenan had fought for the Belt.

This was one of the most tremendous battles in the history of the prize-ring. The American weighed 200 pounds, the Englishman 150; they fought toe-to-toe for two hours and twenty minutes until the ring was broken and the police stopped the fight. The contestants, Heenan blind and Sayers with a broken arm, were dragged away, both loudly protesting that they were perfectly fit to go on. Each man was awarded an exact replica of the same Belt. To this day, a hundred years later, students of the subject are still arguing as to what the issue would have been if the fight had gone on a few minutes longer. Thackeray was convinced that Sayers would have knocked the bigger man senseless, and said so in one of the silliest bits of verse *Punch* ever printed:

Just when ten minutes used aright
Had made the fight his own!

. . . and so forth. But Penitence Twatchman thought otherwise. He was not quite the sort of fellow one takes to supper at one's club, Thackeray thought; the dearest, best behaved, comicalest, good-naturedest fellow in or out of the New World, upon his life and honour! – but really, since one must defer to those devilish dull dogs at the grim old Garrick . . . perhaps, shall we say, not *quite* . . . ? So they went to supper in that famous old theatrical public house, the Coal Hole in the Strand. Here, mellowed by gin-and-water cold, with two lumps of sugar and a curl of lemon peel, Thackeray's tone became commiserating.

'But Twatchman, my dear fellow,' he said, lighting a black cigar, 'taken by and large, your visit must have been a most appalling disappointment to you!'

Penitence Twatchman said, placidly, 'Well, no sir, not exactly. It is true that Mr Dickens could not see his way clear to grant us the pleasure and privilege of his company in the United States, although I had dared to hope—'

'—Dear Charles! He's the most generous, impulsive, industrious soul alive, and he commits himself to the very limit of human endurance and beyond, by heaven. But he never did feel quite at home in your charming country, my dear fellow. Although the most gentlemanly dog that ever drew the breath of life, he often does sometimes say the wrong thing at the wrong time – out of sheer big-heartedness, for the dome of St Paul's would not be half large enough to contain what beats in his bosom! . . Do you know Mr Washington Irving? As delightful a

creature, I declare, as ever saw the light of day, but sober – if one may carry a cardinal virtue too far – sober and cool as Lake Erie. Cool! An iceberg in a nankeen waistcoat, wearing the Aurora Borealis for a neckcloth, by all that's frigorific – and distant, my dear creature, distant as Van Diemen's Land. I have heard him called an utter little prig, but it's the confoundedest lie, for he is the charmingest little gentleman that ever soiled his fingers with ink, and stooped to the level of us poor devils of scribblers.'

'Well, I allow Mr Washington Irving *is* reserved,' said Penitence Twatchman.

'Reserved! The Royal Box at the Opera is Billingsgate Market compared with him, upon my honour as a gentleman! Now when Charles was in your country and Mr Irving came to pay his respects, Charles, wishing to put him at his ease in what he thought was the formal American manner, grabbed him by the hand – and he has a grip like a manicured blacksmith – punched him in the ribs, slapped him on the back, spat on his instep, and shouted in a peculiarly offensive Nova Scotia accent which he had picked up on board ship, having the most marvellous ear in this world or the next, together with a voice like a champion town-crier when he chooses, "Waal! My! Only think! Do tell!" – hurled Mr Irving onto a sofa, felt the quality of his waistcoat, and screamed, "Holy mackerel! Jumping snakes! Dad-gast it, give it a name! Shall it be gin sling, sherry cobbler, whisky cocktail or brandy smash?" Poor Washington Irving fainted dead away. But dear Charles is the lovable-est, talentedest man that ever wore three watch-chains and a brocade waistcoat, by George! How did you like his waistcoats, by the way?'—

Penitence Twatchman said, 'Well, then, sir, I am told

that one evening when Mr Charles Dickens was taking the air in Philadelphia, sir, a very gaudily dressed man accosted him familiarly and said, "Hello, mister! Say, are you Pumphrey's Ladies' Pills? I am Okeefenokee Consumption Cure." '

Screaming with laughter, Thackeray said, 'You must never let Charles hear that one. He's the humorous-est dog that ever cracked a rib under the canopy of heaven, but he wouldn't like that.'

'Why, then, Mr Thackeray, Mr Dickens told it me himself the day before yesterday.'

'Oh? . . . Oh. Well, I'm sorry for your sake he is not taking your offer, my dear Mr Twatchman.'

'Yes sir, Literature's gain is the Theatre's loss. I would have taken Alexandre Dumas back with me for a lecture tour, but, don't you see, the young ladies like to think of him as a romantic young nobleman, whereas he is an elderly person of colour, and it would be too much of a gamble. I do not like to gamble, sir.'

'Surely, you staked something on Heenan to beat Sayers?' said Thackeray.

'Why, no sir. But I signed Heenan for a tour as champion of the world the day before yesterday.'

'Champion of the world? But he isn't. Sayers would have grassed him for good in another minute!'

'That, sir, must eternally remain conjectural. As for the title of champion, sir, a little suppositious hyperbole is the poetic licence of the impresario. . . . Drink up, Mr Thackeray, sir! . . . Yes, in common with many gentlemen in his profession, John Carmel Heenan aspires to the Stage.'

'Perhaps you mean the ladies upon it?' said Thackeray.

Penitence Twatchman said, 'If that were so, sir, surely Heenan would find himself in some very noble company? Who does not love and admire the Sex, sir? No, I was referring, Mr Thackeray, to dramatic aspirations which pugilists have, in common with politicians, lawyers, surgeons, etcetera, etcetera. Similarly, many politicians and the like aspire to be pugilists. Charles James Fox had a punishing right-hand punch. Lord Byron was a peer of the realm, and a great poet, but his greatest delight – or let us say, his greatest delight but one – was in sparring with Jackson. I am reliably informed, sir, that His Lordship, the Sixth Baron Byron, though handicapped by a club foot, had a left cross that would jar the teeth in the head of a hippopotamus. And yourself, sir, hailed as the Greatest Novelist in the language, sir—' Twatchman solemnly raised his hat '–pray do not tell me that your admiration for Tom Sayers is pure patriotic feeling. No sir, I venture to say that every spectator at the ring would be a pugilist just then, if he could, just as in the theatre every man in the pit and the gallery would be the hero and slay the villain, if he dared. And as for the other thing – why, it is not fists the fighter needs to fear, but petticoats; for it has been the misfortune of many a lion-hearted hero that ladies love pugilists quite as much as pugilists love ladies, if not more.'

The conversation seemed to be taking a turn which Thackeray found displeasing, for Penitence Twatchman, it appeared, could twang in the nose as sententiously as a Pennsylvania moralist; so he said, 'By George and the dragon too, how confoundedly right you are! But touching the matter of dear Charles: you know, I daresay, that he is the philoprogenitive-est fellow since the Patriarchs,

and every year Mrs Dickens presents him with another little addition to his already rather crowded quiver? You must know, of course, that since *Pickwick* he has been, among the artisan classes – who are the sturdiest fellows in the world, by the Lord Harry, and the backbone of England and all that – a sort of demigod. Now it happens that the names Dickens and Dickenson are not uncommon in this quarter of our jolly old world. Thus, it is by no means unusual for one of the numerous Mrs Dickenses in no way related to Charles to christen her son either Albert after our beloved Prince Regent, or Charles after our beloved prince of the pen, or both. Well, the other day my dear Wilkie Collins – imaginative man, drinks a wee bit too much, takes laudanum – said to our friend, "Charlie, I've been working it out: if things go on at this rate, in twenty years there will be 65,000 little Charlie Dickenses in England." It was ill-timed, because Mrs Dickens is expecting another delightful surprise. Charles almost hurled a decanter at poor Wilkie's knobbly head – which, although nobody can deny is packed with genius, between ourselves *does* bulge at the temples.'

But Penitence Twatchman went on inexorably, 'Indeed sir? In my country a prominent forehead has been considered as connoting intellect, and many a man has set himself up as a Thinker, with no more qualification, sir, than a habit of wearing cocked over one eye a brow like a wash-leather bag stuffed with billiard balls. I remember one such who, on the strength of such a forehead *plus* some theatrical antecedents became offensively condescending to me because I could not see the dramatic unities in a play of his to be entitled *Demarete and Euainetos,* which consisted in six acts of metaphysical discussion in the other

world, between two characters in identical nightgowns perfumed with ether and backed by an invisible chorus crying, "Woe! Woe! Woe!" That was a Mr Edgar Poe, who has some vogue at present in France. Sir, a forehead is no more sign of intellect than a pugnacious jaw is an indication of a fighting spirit.'

Thackeray did not like this: it happened that he had a pugnacious jaw, the breaking of his nose in early youth having so altered the natural set of his mild pink face. He shook his head, while Penitence Twatchman continued, 'To resume, sir. The stage exercises an irresistible fascination for ladies and gentlemen in all walks of life; for show me one who would not be what he is not, sir, and I'll show you an angel! Heenan: drink apart, the Sex will send him back to the Benicia shanties where he hails from. The ladies, Mr Thackeray, the ladies cannot resist his Irish power of persuasion, for when given "No" for an answer he uses the back of his right hand to underscore his rejoinder. But though he were strong enough to cross-buttock a buffalo from here to Maiden Lane, a fringe of eyelashes may sweep him up like so much rice powder. But we will make the most of him, for his own sake as well as for ours, before he goes the way of such Homeric battlers as Baldwin, who died at twenty-eight; and the overwhelming Pearce, immortalized as "The Game Chicken", and the redoubtable James Burke, whom history records as "The Deaf 'Un". I had dealings, sir, with the last named.'

Thackeray boiled over with enthusiasm at once, and cried, 'No, sir, not really? Did you know Deaf Burke? Bless my heart and soul, but in my boyhood he was next door but one to the Duke of Wellington in the popular

estimation, for a little while at least. He lost the Champion's Belt to Bendigo in 1839 – and then only by a foul. But what a foul fighter Bendigo was! He was—' Thackeray lowered his voice '—one of triplets, you know – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego Thompson, of Nottingham – but they called him Bendigo. Dirtiest fighter in the ring, but a delightful fellow, I'm told, and the sincerest of hearts. He turned preacher, of course, when his hands got broken—'

'—Yes, sir. An evangelist, sir. I might have done well with him on circuit at home. I had, indeed, a passing idea of having little Bendigo in a parson's bands, preaching the Good Word in a tent on tour and taking on all comers in the name of—' Penitence Twatchman raised his hat '—but it fell through. I would have matched him, sir, against a one-eyed nigra seven feet tall, whom we used to call "Old Swamp Root"; planned to put the black in red tights with a barbed tail. But in this life we cannot have everything our own way.'

Whichever way Thackeray jumped, the sententious Yankee seemed to be effortlessly ahead of him. He said, almost desperately, 'You know, after Bendigo had turned from pugilist to parson, as it were overnight, he met darling old Lord Longford in the street. Devilish salty old character, Lord Longford! "Well, Bendigo, and who are you fighting now?" asks his lordship. Dear Bendigo, pulling his sanctimonious-est face, replies, "I'm fighting the Devil now, an' it please your lordship." My Lord Longford says, "Why then, damn my eyes, Bendigo, if you don't fight the devil more cleanly than you fought Deaf Burke, lay me bleeding but I change sides!" '

Penitence Twatchman said, 'Yes, sir, I have heard the

anecdote; but his lordship Lord Longford did not say Deaf Burke. He said Big Ben Caunt. For it was my friend Deaf Burke who fouled Bendigo on the ropes.'

Thackeray said, 'Dear old Deaf Burke—'

'—With submission, Mr Thackeray, he was not really deaf; and as for age, he scarcely attained his thirty-fifth year before he died of consumption. Oh, petticoats, petticoats—'

'—He was an exponent, I am told, of the dear old English straight left.'

'I most bitterly grieve to contradict you, sir,' said Penitence Twatchman, 'but it was justly observed of James Burke that there was nothing straight about him, least of all his left-hand punch.'

At this Thackeray threw himself back in his chair and fairly shouted with laughter. Calling for more to drink, he said, 'Penitence, Penitence, as sure as Edmund Kean drank himself silly under this very roof, there's no knowing where to have you! I wish I may die on the spot and be buried at the crossroads if you are not a veritable bonded warehouse of bottled and sealed secret information and an Encyclopedia of the Unlikely! Come, sir, tell me more, for I'm damned if there's not more of a liberal education to be got from you than ever came out of Oxford in a hundred years!' And he composed himself to listen graciously while Penitence Twatchman, playing with the sugar and the lemon peel in his tumbler, made such a dexterous game of it – tinkle, squeeze, swirl and stir; rattle, clink, toast, taste and smack – that any bystander would have kissed the Bible and sworn he was energetically quenching a bottomless thirst. But he was making a

pantomime of swilling gin, while he drank it only in moderate sips, talking suavely all the while.

And there never was a more inoffensive talker than Penitence Twatchman, whatever the subject. It must have been a diplomat, indeed, who could talk to Thackeray about the blood-spattered love life of the bruiser Deaf Burke over gin-and-water in the Coal Hole, and have it said of his narrative by Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*, 'It ain't for men and it ain't for women, and it's unfit for children, Willie – give it to a Yankee magazine.' Twatchman never, for example, introduced the name of the Deity, even in supplication or gratitude: when he came to the word he just paused, bowed and raised his hat. And if he had to quote another man's oath, he would say 'By ——!' very curtly, and give his hat an angry knock, so that it sounded like a muffled drum. But he only touched the brim of his hat when he mentioned the Duke of Northumberland, and let the names of the lesser nobility pass with casual, but polite, nods of recognition. *Penitence Twatchman blessed by Nod and cursed by Thud,* is another line we find of Thackeray's.

In this manner he talked on. . . .

It is impossible to say, sir, what Deaf Burke carried (said Penitence Twatchman) in that space between the ears which is supposed to house the mind. It would be vain even to guess at the ingredients of whatever inharmonious gumbo, lumpy chowder, gritty lobscouse, sticky olla podrida or fantastical porridge Providence was pleased to ladle into his skull in lieu of brains. Referring to him, people sometimes tapped their temples and said, 'Not all there.' But they were wrong, sir; he was more than

all there, he was overcrowded there, it was Standing Room Only there, with the aisles choked, the gas leaking, the doorways blocked and a set-piece of coloured fireworks ready to go off for a grand finale.

An embodiment of Anarchy, sir, a one-man Reign of Terror; a bucketful of reeking Saturnalia compressed into one cube, like Swaynes' Patent Turtle Soup, one ounce of which in hot water will more than satiate fourteen people and the dog; such was Deaf Burke when I knew him, and not entirely because of the punishment he had taken in the Ring. I was told that he had always been like that.

He was imbued with a most ardent enthusiasm for the Stage, sir, and from the age of sixteen had, without invitation, regularly taken an active part in various presentations of Shakespeare's plays. It must be understood that, with all his shortcomings, Jem Burke was a generous, warm-hearted kind of fellow, who loved nothing better than to give pleasure to his friends; while, as for the fair sex, his gallantry towards them would have been positively Quixotic, if it had been a little more fundamentally Platonic. Thus, one night he went to the theatre for the first time to see a performance of *Othello*.

His was the kind of intellect, sir, which could never (except in a fight) immediately grasp what was going on. He had an uneasy feeling, in the last scene of the play, that something was amiss in Othello's household; he did not know exactly what, but he smelled trouble brewing, somewhere. So he asked one of his friends:

'Vot's a-goin' on, Ed'ard?'

'Vy,' says Edward, winking at the others of his party, 'the black 'un is accusin' the lady of ob-noxious conduct.'

'Vot is 'e? A 'Merican?' for he thought all Americans

were negroes, having been regaled with stories of the old pugilist Bill Richmond, by his friend Wood, the Battling Coachman.

'That's right,' says Edward. 'Ain't 'e, Joe?'

'Ain't 'e just! *And* a Irishman, too,' says Joe; for Burke's bitterest enemy was an Irish bargee named O'Brien.

'Yes, it's a shame,' says Edward. 'O'Thello, that's rank Irish.'

'Vot's 'e a-doing of vith that 'ere cushion?' asks Burke, in mounting excitement.

'Bless my 'eart if 'e ain't a-suffocatin' of 'er!' says Joe.

'The impidence of it!' says Edward.

' 'E'll be the death of 'er, that's for certain,' says a third.

'Are ve a'goin' to stand by and see this done?' cries Burke.

'Cert'nly not,' says Joe.

Then, game as a stag, young Burke bounds high as venison over the balcony rail, shouting, 'Britons never, never, never!' – he clears the orchestra with one jump, and knocks Othello off the stage into the big drum.

'All right, young 'ooman, I'll stand by!' he cries, offering Desdemona his handkerchief with a flourish; what time Iago, Lodovico and Cassio come on in a body, supported by a prompter and a scene-shifter, and Othello clambers back on armed with a clarinet and bleeding from the nose; Desdemona, the couch having collapsed, has hysterics, while Burke lays about him in all directions.

The manager roars, 'Why doesn't someone put him out?'

A wag bellows, 'That's just wot King Charles said when 'e saw the Great Fire o' London!'

And such is human nature, sir, that the audience is as

pleased as if this is exactly what it has paid money to see!

On another occasion, his friends having explained to him that Caliban had made improper advances to the heroine of *The Tempest,* Burke offered to knock the monster's head off – actually did so, said head being made of painted buckram, uncovering the head of a respectable white-haired person whom he chased around and around through the better part of Act Two, before he was caught in a property fishing-net and dragged into the alley.

For he was as agile as he was powerful, magnificently proportioned, though not a big man, with a herculean chest and arms. Even in his early and tragic decline, as I can bear witness, the muscles in his back and shoulders jumped and writhed under his coat like ferrets in a rat-catcher's pockets. He got his living, when a boy, at the healthiest trade in the world – that of waterman – and was said to be one of the finest oarsmen on the Thames.

Yes, he was a 'Jack-on-the-Water', as they called them, working off Strand Stairs, not a stone's throw from this very tavern, sir, and he had fought and beaten double his weight from Westminster to Twickenham before he was seventeen. On this same River Thames he had lost, or rather never acquired, the habit of conversing except at a great distance. An ordinary speaking voice was a whisper to him, which must be one of the reasons why he enjoyed the powerful delivery of the better tragic actors. His own voice was adapted for shouting, and when he tried to speak in ordinary tones it came out low and husky, curiously broken and humbly imploring.

It seems to have induced a pleasingly tickling sensation in the ears of the Sex, sir, whatever he happened to say; bless their susceptible little hearts, they will find an inner

significance where none is perceptible to our coarser sensibilities: I must admit that I had to guard myself, for fear that I might offend Burke by telling him for pity's sake to clear his throat. But the ladies adored him. It was not that he was handsome – not that a man need be, of course – and it was not that he possessed particular charm of manner. His face was not actually repulsive, with its large, wide-spaced eyes and dangerously fresh complexion; but I could not find it in my heart to say, with Mrs Appleby: 'His nose, remoulded rather than broken, pushes forward the upper lip to emphasize its delicately sensuous curve, so that his smile is unexpectedly sweet, and touched with an indefinable sadness that matches his low, calm and melancholy intonation . . .'

Sadness – pshaw! He was bright and empty and gay as a sleigh-bell, poor boy. Calm and melancholy! All he said to Mrs Appleby, when she asked him what he meant to do in America, was:

'Vy, then, my dear, I aims to scuttle the knuckly coves, kiss the morts, slush the rich lush, an' play merry old Tom Tiddler wi' the dibs. Hey?' Which means, *I intend to try my prowess in the Ring, pay my respects to the ladies, enjoy an occasional well-earned glass of wine and earn an honest dollar.*

He could not even speak comprehensible English: even your average Cockney had some difficulty understanding him, he slurred his words so, and he peppered his broken sentences with weird oaths. He was a man without a care in the world, heeding nothing and caring for nobody. He lived as he fought, instinctively, from blow to blow; and as he fought, so he lived, blindly, until he dropped. Let us say that he was over-activated, sir, so that he was too

childishly aware that he was young and alive ever to be a mature and reasoning creature. Hence, it may be, he was specifically attractive to a *conductive* type of woman, much as a piece of soft iron is made attractive to smaller particles of the same base metal by the passage through it of an electric current.

Mere animal magnetism is all that it takes to stir the merely animal particles in the best of us. The pathologists assure us that the noblest of us has in his bloodstream enough iron to make a keg of nails. Unlike poles attract. *Verb sap:* it was not remarkable that Deaf Burke should fall in love with a noble lady; but the results, I fear, were far less edifying and satisfactory than an electrical experiment with inanimate objects. Here was no philosophical Galvani, sir, with a wire and a dead frog, no pure and benevolent Benjamin Franklin with kite and key; but an histrionic anarch who once leapt over the barrier at Astley's Theatre and bloodied the noses of the entire Roman Army during the showing of a set piece entitled *The Carrying-Off of the Sabine Women.*

And such a man, in love, is not elevated to the Empyrean, as you or I might be; he falls, like Lucifer, into the Bad Place, where there are no friends to encourage him and no claque to cheer, and where there are no happy endings.

Now the old coachman Wood who, having been frightfully thrashed by some of the most notable figures in the Ring, was wise in the tricks of the trade, took Burke in hand when he was only twenty years old, and tried to make a man of him. That is to say, he found patrons for Burke among the monied gentry and, with promises of pinchbeck brooches and little bribes of gaudy silk handker-

chiefs, coaxed him to eat lean beefsteak, drink nothing stronger than double stout, go to bed early and stop smoking. His strongest argument was:

'How do you expect King William to inwite you to Buckingham Palace for tea if you stagger in a-sucking on a tuppenny cigar and reeking o' liptrap?'

Jemmy Burke secretly fancied himself as being formed for high society; but he was not, he was not. You see, his trainer, Wood, had fought and been defeated by the negro Bill Richmond, who had been brought from America by no less a person than His Grace the Duke of Northumberland; so he felt, somehow, that he was not entirely without noble connexions, however remote.

Once, when the high-spirited, tomboyish Lady Brookbourne came with Sir Didrington Brookbourne to see him spar, Burke, coming the gentleman, said to Wood in a haughty tone, 'Me good fella, give 'er ladyship a sup o' bleedin' Wages-O'-Sin' – meaning gin.

Wood whispered, 'Mind yer manners, Deaf 'Un.'

Burke corrected himself, 'Vy o' course – Mr Vood, fetch 'er ladyship a sup o' bleedin' brandy.' And when her ladyship sportingly consented to put her lips to the cognac, Burke encouraged her with, 'Bless yer little cotton stockings, me lydy, clink glasses! – the top o' mine to the bottom o' yourn – drink up, it varms the trolleybobs . . . Sorry, I mean guts.'

And her ladyship found him charming! The ladies love fearlessness in men. If there is one thing they love more than a gentleman, it is a ruffian. If neither of these is available, such is their divine nature they will love anything in between.

How so be it, under Wood's care, Deaf Burke became

Champion of England before his twenty-fourth birthday; in which year, 1833, he fought that unforgettable fight with the Irish Champion, Simon Byrne – without question, the most fearful battle the ring has ever seen, or ever will see. The contestants fought like bulldogs in a sack in a field called No-Man's-Land in Hertfordshire, for three hours and two minutes by the timekeeper's watch – ninety-nine rounds! – until even the hardened crowd cried, 'Stop the fight!' for both men were blind and unrecognizable. But the seconds dragged them to the scratch, and Wood rallied his man with the old waterman's cry, 'Over the water, Jack! Jack on the water, ahoy!' and Burke, who had turned inside out all the pockets of his endurance, seemed to rummage in the tattered lining and find a farthing's worth of energy he did not know he had, which he spent in one last despairing blow. The Irishman went down and never rose again, for he died two days later without regaining consciousness.

Deaf Burke narrowly escaped the gallows for that, and I do not believe he was ever the same man again, although such was his vitality that he was about the musical public houses within the week, hob-nobbing in steaming gin-and-water with the riff-raff of the Ring. Yet it was this fight more than any other which caught the imagination of our free and enlightened American public, sir, so that we were able, even at a considerably later date, to arrange for him an American tour and make it worth his while. I was a young man then, but old in the ways of the theatre, though still with my way to make.

It had been represented to me that Deaf Burke was not only a great prize-fighter but also a man of histrionic talent, and the Answer to a Maiden's Prayer, to boot –

although, if I were a maiden, and Deaf Burke was sent in reply to my artless supplications, I should be tempted to turn infidel. It had been my idea to have our versatile Mrs Bethany write a moral play for him: some little piece in five or six acts in which he, as hero, should at the close of every scene rescue a young lady from bears, burning houses, mortgage holders, a fate worse than death, etcetera. I had an arresting title for it, too: *Not Honour More* or *Right Is Might – A Drama of Love and Temptation.* But it was not to be.

He arrived in New York some time in 1840, having in advance laid up some hard feeling for himself in America. On board the package-boat he had antagonized a powerful American journalist, reproving him for expectorating into the Atlantic Ocean by saying, 'Britannia rules the vaves – I defies you to spit in my sea! And the Qveen jist married, too!' He had a platonic passion for Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Again: one of his old cronies had put into his head some stories about how much one might buy in America, and for how little, so he offered to buy General Cyrus Talintyre's daughter, Calpurnia, for a quantity of beads.

He mistook the fat Turkish potentate Faouzi Bey for a coloured slave; picked him up by the elbows, and said, 'Ye'll tip the beam at fourteen stone – 'ow much would you fetch per pound, now, you bein' a bit flabby under the cutwater?' And having irritated the eminent Irish patriot, Sir Daniel Costello, by some ill-considered remarks about his fellow countrymen, he apologized quite artlessly, saying, '*I'm* sorry, guv, I thought you vas an Eyetalian – 'ow vas *I* to know? – *I* never see a Irisher in a shirt-collar before.'

He landed wearing a gold-buttoned Newmarket coat and two waistcoats, one crimson, the other lavender-colour; fawn trousers with a wide black stripe, a Paisley neckcloth in a peacock pattern, yellow gloves and a curly white hat; carrying like a trophy a bamboo cane four feet long with a silver band as wide as your hand, an ivory head in the shape of a rat sitting on a skull and a monstrous tassel. He can scarcely have impressed the dispassionate observer as a responsible gentleman, sir, and matters were not improved when, interviewed by a New York editor on the wharf, he said that any Briton could 'whop' any three Yankees.

'What about George Washington, sir?' asks the editor.

'Ve vopped 'im, didn't ve, Jack?' says Deaf Burke, to one of the gentlemen accompanying him.

'No, Deaf 'Un – that was Bonaparte,' says Mr Jack.

'Vy then, if a Froggie could vop Voshington, vot vouldn't a Briton 'a done to 'im?' cries Burke, as we drag him away.

The editor wrote his article in a white heat and brought out a Special Edition, which the vendors sold, shouting, 'Patriots to Arms! War Imminent! Extry, extry! British Ultimatum to the United States of America!' – for the editor had mistaken Deaf Burke for the British Secretary for War, now Lord Macaulay, having been wrongly informed that this was so by the editor of a rival paper.

Most of the New York press found fault with him: The *Advertiser* called him 'a demented bumpkin'; the *Evening Freedom* said that he ought to be locked up; the *Liberal American* described him as 'a typical strutting English aristocrat . . . We hear this creature aspires to glory in our enlightened theatre, but we venture to prophesy that

the Stage he is destined to occupy will be a table in a Showman's Booth, pickled in a Jar . . .' Etcetera and etcetera. Yet that same Mrs Appleby whom I have quoted, the editress of *Mrs Appleby's Ladies' Forum and Gentlewomen's Vade Mecum*, a lady of stunning intellectual and philosophical attainments, sir, but too masculine in appearance for my liking, having a moustache and goatee although the mother of six – a lady properly described as having no nonsense about her, whose voice grated on the ear like the sound of an over-careful housewife buttering burnt toast, which was an admirable voice for stating facts – averred:

'. . . Here is an Elemental, Dramatic Power, a force to uproot tree-stumps, let alone the Female Heart! ! ! O, shall not Mr Edwin Forrest tremble, must not Mr Booth quake, in the presence of this Demosthenic, this Ciceronic Roscius? ? ? ! ! ! . . .'

Yet all he had said to her about the stage was, 'Vy, cor blow me tight an' float me to Putney for a fi'-pun note! Vy shouldn't *I* 'ave a go at the Caesars? Vy, I mean, it took twenty on 'em to chuck me out o' Drury Lane, didn't it? Cor stuff me wi' coal an' sew me up in a cat's-meat bag an' sink me, ain't there a 'spiracy to keep me off the styge? Lead on your Forrests-es an' your Booths-es, an' cor stone me up Strand Stairs, ve'll try who's best!' This last, Mrs Appleby construed as:

'This passionate and sensitive young Artist has, for his ideals, been stoned by an infuriated and unenlightened Tory mob upon Strand Stairs, at the gates of Buckingham Palace, London! ! ! . . .'

Ludicrous? Somewhat, perhaps, especially if you knew Deaf Burke; but our ladies' magazines have always wielded

great influence in America. Make a hit with the American Sex, sir, and there is no telling how far you may go . . . until the pure but all-too-fluid current of its refined ardour changes its direction, and then *Nod* help you!

Now our Edwin Forrest is a man of stupendous attainments, but he has always been subject to one notable weakness. This, in a nutshell, is his character: tell him that Tom Pumpkin the comedian is poor, ragged, forgotten and dying of want, and Edwin Forrest will be all sympathy, and offer helpful suggestions worth untold gold; but let him hear that Tom Pumpkin has had a couple of rounds of applause, and he will conceive for that unfortunate man an undying, deadly hatred. He must be treated, therefore, like some barbaric monarch: it is death to bring him news of another actor's success, however trivial.

Hence, when the great Macready came to New York in glory in 1849, Mr Forrest incited a riot against him which caused the deaths, at Astor Place, of thirty-four people; but that was eleven years ago, and some nine years after the events I now recount. Twenty years ago Edwin Forrest was more neurasthenically touchy, jealous and suspicious even than he is now – if that were possible. Therefore, at once conceiving of poor muddle-headed silly Jemmy Burke as an invading army in his territory, he decided to meet him on falsely friendly terms, in the Carthaginian style, and spy on him to discover his weak points with intent to destroy him.

Weak points, sir! Why, to try Deaf Burke for his morally weak points was like jumping into a quicksand to prove its yielding quality. They met 'accidentally' at Jammet's Hotel. Call me villain, but it was I who engineered this

meeting. What was I to do? I was a young man with my way to make in the theatrical world, and while I had some interest in Deaf Burke's career in America, I also had an interest, and a greater one, in the career of Mr Forrest.

Alas for human nature! In the theatre, an absolute devotion to the interests of one person is a ticket to the poor-house; that is why I am in the business side of the thespian art, being of an affectionate and philanthropic disposition, sir. As a man of business I can have friendly commerce with everyone. In honest commerce alone may Man be pacifically neutral. I dress hero and villain alike, I make terms for the left hand and the right, I take precisely the same percentage from the top of the bill as I take from the bottom – no more, no less – and thus I am spared the sins of pride, prevarication and presumption which a man falls into who elects himself worthy to take sides. Sir, I am a benevolent neutral. How could I foresee the complications which were to arise from this meeting of Edwin Forrest and Deaf Burke at Jammet's Hotel?

I outlined for Mr Forrest as much of Burke's character as I could piece together from what I had seen and heard; and I spoke to Burke of Mr Forrest as an artist who needed no introduction. But I was a little surprised to see, in Edwin Forrest's party, the Countess Victoria Przybyszewska – a young lady of foreign extraction, very noble, very haughty and full of the pride of her race, which was Polish. I had met her a year previous, when she was masquerading, for the sake of her family's dignity, in the guise of a humble teacher of the pianoforte, singing and elocution, under the comparatively easy name of Miss

Caroline Pringle hailing from near Kikitioga, Pennsylvania.

I say, surprised; because, upon my soul, Mrs Siddons herself could not have played more to the life the role of a clergyman's orphan in reduced circumstances, sitting mumchance at meals with the family and keeping her place as a subordinate! Why, having watched her at our first meeting – for it is my habit, sir, to observe human behaviour – even I, Penitence Twatchman, who claim to know an actor when I see one, had no idea but that she was exactly what she was represented as being! But when, happening to visit that same fine house a week or so later, I casually inquired after Miss Pringle, the lady of the house said, 'She is a wretch, an ungrateful creature; never more mention her name.' It appeared that she had departed after some misunderstanding involving the mislaying of an enamel watch, a gold brooch with *Kismet* in seed pearls, a set of filigree buttons and six silver spoons; which articles Miss Pringle swore had been put into her box by a spiteful housemaid.

I saw her again when she came to my establishment to hire a ball-dress; and then she was neither demure nor of a subordinate demeanour, but straight-looking, clear-spoken in an incisive yet drawling way, and had acquired a certain curl of the lip. Also, she could make her nostrils quiver, but her presence was such that I said to myself, 'Her nostrils always did quiver, only she suppressed the fact because quivering nostrils are not in keeping with the role of governess which she saw fit to play.' She spoke of her late employers as 'vulgar little plebeians', and hinted that if she had her rights she would employ the likes of their daughters to carry swill to the pigs. And she

let it be known that she would not be averse – she being in temporarily reduced circumstances – to acting in a play, if I could find her a part worthy of her.

I would have done so, too, but she had only the tiniest little silvery voice; it would scarcely have carried beyond the footlights. But now here she was, presumably in her true colours: a Polish Countess.

I have never seen a Polish Countess, but I know how one ought to appear: if it comes to that, sir, I have never seen a Prince of Denmark, but I know my *Hamlet* – whereas, conversely, I *have* met the fire-eating wife of an Italian Republican and she wouldn't have done at all for Brutus's Portia. Sir, there is a Latin proverb, or motto, *Esse quam videri*; which means that it is better to be, rather than to seem to be. To this I make answer: that in a fleshly world reality is in the eye of the beholder. So, what does a Polish Countess look like? Like the Countess Przybyszewska.

She should exude the quintessence of the Aristocratic, sir, in a simple but costly gown of pearl-grey watered silk to blend with her pale golden beauty. Her hair should be of a strikingly light blonde tint, uncurled, severely dressed, to make one of a piece with her firm but delicate features, her skin, which should be tenderly reminiscent of a sunset on snow, her chiselled coral lips; while, in startling contrast, her eyes should be large, black and brilliant. Her only jewellery should be of jet, or some other ebon substance. To crown all, an air of undermined health and a sick headache.

Our Countess's jewellery was of iron. Her family had melted down its gold to aid the cause of the immortal Kosciusko – who served as Aide to George Washington,

sir, and was Engineer in charge of Fortifications at West Point, being in point of actual fact a veritable holy terror in the cause of Polish Independence – but before casting their heirlooms into the pot, some noble Polish ladies had caused replicas to be made of these priceless gold objects in common iron. This iron they wore as a Symbol. The Poles despise gold – you can buy gold with mere money, sir, but a Symbol comes mighty high!

La Przybyszewska! – the name itself breathes poetry, I think, sir?

Free, now, of the need to dissemble, the Countess had abandoned her so admirably simulated up-country Pennsylvania intonation. She had even stopped pretending to speak English, as she had spoken it hitherto, with tolerable precision and unquestionable fluency, and talked the way a Polish Countess should: with a strong French accent and a charming lack of vocabulary. And when she smiled – which was seldom, because she had suffered much, sir – one felt that one was being harmlessly teased by a young girl with a half-glimpse of a pearl bracelet in a rose velvet case; and she is saying, 'Will you give me a kiss if I let you look?'

For the lady was, indeed, not more than twenty years old and was, therefore, constantly chaperoned by her aunt, the Baroness Potocki. I had never seen the Baroness before, not being at that time accustomed to move in high society, but I knew her black velvet dress: for, unless I was much mistaken, I had rented it to two or three Lady Macbeths before it was purchased by a touring manager in a job-lot.

To such straits are the womenfolk of noble patriots reduced!

I did not know what to make of all this, at first. But I was soon forced to the inevitable conclusion that Edwin Forrest who, in his professional jealousies was as meticulous as he was in his costumes, had brought the Countess as a sort of auxiliary. If need be, he would hold the ramparts against this mysterious Mr Burke, with his delicately sensuous curves and all that, while the Countess would harry him from the flank; I speak of his flank, sir, purely in a military sense. But a glance was enough to convince Edwin Forrest that he had nothing to fear from Burke, who impressed him at once as being a mere *pastiche*, a grotesque, an inebriated clown; for Deaf Burke had made the interesting discovery that cognac diluted with champagne was more exhilarating than brandy-and-water, and far more genteel.

Now any other man would have passed the matter off with a light laugh, and forgotten it forthwith. But Edwin Forrest was so constituted that he chose to regard this ridiculously trivial matter as having something to do with a tremendous conspiracy against him. In his highly Shakespearean mind some soothsayer croaked, 'Beware, O Edwin! Thy Persecutors are hemming thee in!' In any case, he suspected that he was being made the object of a practical joke – and he would take the point of a stiletto with better grace than the point of a jest. So it was as if he said to himself in a hissing 'aside', 'So-ho; He who laughs last laughs best! Two can play this game!' and he greeted Deaf Burke with overwhelming cordiality, saying:

'Alas, Mr Burke, now that you have come to America, our poor Yankee mummers had better fly to England, I hear.'

And Deaf Burke – trust him to say the wrong thing! –

quite at his ease, says, 'Vy, then, your mama's safe enough wi' me, bless 'er wrinkled old 'eart. Cor bust my granny's stays, I likes 'em young an' dimply not old an' pimply – like it says in the song.'

This is just the kind of thing people laugh at, who laugh at this kind of thing. People laughed; and then it seemed to Forrest that the man Burke was diabolically subtle and satanically sly – clever, sir, and 'cute as they come! But then Burke was presented to the Countess Przybyszewska and, as he said later:

'. . . She struck me blinder in vun tick nor ever Simon Byrne done me in ninety-nine rounds! She got me groggier nor Bendigo! Them black peepers o' hern 'it me between the eyes like two shiny great lumps o' coal – she sobered me like soda water! An' if that ain't love, cor blyme me!'

Not as poetical, sir, as Mr Longfellow, perhaps? But as near the lyrical as he could get. Indeed, the glance she gave him would have reached many a less susceptible heart than his, and when she addressed him as 'Meestair Bourrrka', it was like the purring of some melodious kitten.

Let us sum up: the excitement of our dazzling metropolis, the brilliant gaslight and the mirrors, and the gilding and the velvet of Jammet's Hotel, the glitter of a distinguished company, the heady drink, the seeming friendliness of the most famous actor in America, and the admiring glance of a presumably real Countess: such a combination was too strong for this infatuated fellow, enamoured of the Sex and enchanted by the glamour of a noble name.

Now, Edwin Forrest pressed upon the poor bemused

boy a pass to his theatre, which he wrote out in a flowing hand on the back of his private card, saying:

'You will honour our wretched little theatre with your distinguished presence, I trust, Mr Burke?'

'Not 'alf I won't, guv'ner – try me an' see!' says Burke.

Edwin Forrest adds, 'I have also ventured to add the glorious names of the Baroness Potocki and her ravishing niece, the Countess Przybyszewska.' Then, to the ladies, 'I am sure that Mr Burke will be a worthy escort for two such charming and fastidious ornaments of Society?'

The rest of the company is amused; the gentlemen turn laughs into groans of approval; the ladies hide their smiles with their fans. But the Baroness and the Countess bow haughty gratitude, while Deaf Burke, looking at the bit of pasteboard which he is holding upside down, gapes, speechless as a pickled calf's head, until he finally manages to say, 'Cor!'

But Mr Jack, who was Burke's constant companion, said to me in an undertone, 'By Thud, Mr Penitence Twatchman, can't the Deaf 'Un make enough of a fool of himself on his own without your bringing in a clique to assist him?'

'Why then, sir,' says I, 'the poor fellow is quite insensible to ridicule, surely?'

'Well then,' says Mr Jack, 'the more shame for Edwin Forrest, and for you too! For Jemmy Burke has a heart, though childish; and what damned blackguard dares to risk the Wrath to Come by making mock of a child?'

'Come, come, Mr Jack,' I tell him, 'as Mr Benjamin Franklin said, what the eye don't see the heart does not

grieve for. And Deaf Burke lacks vision. The whole world is amused, and he is gratified—'

'—Oh, keep your blamed reach-me-down second-hand moralizings for your rag-and-bone shop!' says Mr Jack, very uncivilly. 'I cite a higher Authority respecting the Least of These, which Burke is, and although I cannot guarantee you a millstone about your neck I will undertake to warrant you a spoiled profile if you offend against him!'

He was a strange character, this Mr Jack. He had come down in the world, it was said, but from where nobody knew. There was an air of breeding about him that his rough, sullen demeanour could never quite conceal. It may be you have encountered certain individuals that pass as gentlefolk until taken off-guard, when they seem to burst at the gussets so that the gutter shows through? Well then, sir, with Mr Jack the reverse was the case. He commonly dressed flash and shabby, and he talked coarse, and yet – how shall I put it? – his manners were too good for his manner.

There is a difference between posture and poise: Mr Jack could not help carrying himself, sometimes, so that he seemed to be out of place in his fleshly covering, as a nobleman in a mechanic's smock. You may spoil, but never disguise a good coat, sir: the worn patches and the stains sometimes serve to emphasize the tasteful cut of it. It was when he was in a temper that the gentleman in him came out, and then it showed like the unfaded parts where the gold braid used to be on a cast-off military surtout. He was not so much a man down-at-heels, but rather a man who had trodden his heels down. Lounging in his walk, grimy in his linen, slovenly about the neckcloth, and

dishevelled as to his sparse hair, he was still no man's Plain Jack, but *Mister* to the tips of his neglected fingers, sir.

And neglected they were, without a doubt, like all the rest of him, and he was well aware of the fact. He avoided company in England, I was told; it was only in New York, where no one might know him, that he came out into the gaslight at Jammet's, dressed in an old blue coat with silver buttons, a white waistcoat, black trousers and starched linen. He had had his hair and nails trimmed, and if this had been thirty or forty years previous, he might have passed as His Majesty the late King George the Third, turned sensible and escaped from his keepers: he had the same air of royal decay, sir.

'Why, what's Deaf Burke to you?' I ask; and to my surprise my words, which have been intended to be sharp, come out in the form of a polite question.

'A weak and wayward child with a heart to break,' says he, a quick light flashing behind his watery, heavy grey eyes, like winter sun through a torn cloud. 'See you to it, Slops.' And by this contemptuous nickname, which is generally applied to cast-off clothes, he called me thereafter – but I did not take offence: it never pays.

Ah me! It sometimes happens, when a man falls very low, that he tries to find his salvation in serving someone whom he may save, and in this poor individual he pins his last hope. In relation to Deaf Burke, such was Mr Jack, I thought, as he turned on his heel with some ungentlemanly allusions to my already thinning hair, my shortness of stature and my legitimacy. . . . Wasted breath – recall the ball through the powder-smoke after the hammer has fallen, then stop Deaf Burke's spinning flight after he had

been fired by a fantasy! The poor fellow was in love with the Countess.

Sympathetically, but always dispassionately, I have frequently observed the effects of Love upon the human organism, sir, and the actions and reactions attendant upon this fine emotion have impressed me that it strikes at the Seat of Reason through a complication of alternating shocks to the nervous system. It sometimes happens that a medical diagnostician is mistaken into prescribing for Love as for some form of undulant fever or circular madness; but Time is the only sure cure for it. The individual perforated by Cupid's sublime artillery, sir, often finds himself in a nightmarish state wherein hope and despair are almost exactly equally mixed. Many of us come out of it only superficially damaged. Some do not. . . . I knew a decent young man, a grocer, who was rendered so desperate in the prolongation of this condition of mind by the flirtatious object of his passion, that he separated her head from her body with a cheese-wire. I went to see him after the trial. He was no longer in love, he said; but being under a death-sentence he found himself in a nightmarish state wherein hope and despair were almost exactly equally mixed. . . . Now in Love, to make a paradox, where there is despair there is still hope; the smitten party is at least dimly aware that there are two possible endings to the affair, and so if and when the worst comes to the worst there is always a cushion of philosophy, however thin, to absorb some of the shock of disappointment. 'Well,' he or she can say, 'I feared as much all along.' Optimism is deadly dangerous undiluted with doubt, sir.

Now Deaf Burke was so constituted that he was quite incapable of knowing the meaning of doubt, just as he

was insensible to ridicule, physical pain, fatigue and fear. There was something almost touchingly infantile in his all-embracing credulity, and in his inability to tell even the most necessary little white lies. His frankness could be embarrassing. He has been accused of always breaking his promises, but this is not so: he would give you his word, as he would give you anything else he had that you asked for; but he could not keep it, any more than he could keep his money, for he simply did not know that tomorrow is another day. He walked in an everlasting Present, sir, heedlessly kicking aside the debris of dead yesterdays. So when he fell in love he was in heaven, and bliss was a foregone conclusion.

The Countess offered him her hand at parting; it lay on his great palm, which had been calloused to the consistency of horn by years at the oars, like a lily on a shovel, and he stared at it without knowing quite what to do with it. He weighed it, grinned at it and gave it back to her.

Back at his hotel he sat in silence for a while, and then rang for the waiter and ordered half a dozen lemons.

Mr Jack said to him, 'Lemons, eh? If you think you're going to make a night of it over a bowl of punch, Deaf 'Un, you are mistaken. Allow me to remind you, you spar three exhibitions tomorrow, and from now on until this tour is over it is to be early to bed and early to rise for you.'

'Punch? Vot punch?' asks Deaf Burke, as if he has never heard the word before; and, splitting a lemon in two, he proceeds to rub the juice into his hands, which are greenish black and rough as shagreen through being pickled in blue vitriol, which pugilists use to toughen the skin of their knuckles.

'Now, what the Dickens is the fool up to?' growls Mr Jack.

Deaf Burke answers, 'Vy, can't you see, I'm a v'itening on these 'ere forks' – holding out his terrible paws – 'the Countess 'as got 'ands like a quivering skylark. Strike me blind, I've a mind to git a corn-cutter to vork on my fingers!'

Then, ignoring a string of epithets let loose by Mr Jack that would have brought thunderbolts from heaven upon the hotel in Biblical times, he asks, 'Jack, if a cove goes an' marries a Countess, do that make 'im a Count? Or vot? Eh?'

Controlling himself with an effort, Mr Jack says to him, 'What do you want with a title, Deaf 'Un, when you were born with the noblest pair of Dukes in England?' – making a play on the cant word for fists. Then he shouted – 'Lemons! Lemons! Lemons, by *Thud!* Go to bed, you clown, go to bed!'

Burke went, after a brilliant exhibition of footwork, ducking and weaving and stepping backwards, and pouring himself a bumper of brandy at the same time, while Mr Jack tried to take the bottle away from him. It was impossible not to be amused.

But Mr Jack looked at me very sourly, saying, 'Ay, laugh, Slops, laugh.'

'He is so much the baby, Mr Jack!'

'Ah, he is a baby that has not yet learned to cry,' says Mr Jack, 'but he will, he will – damn Forrest and his pasteboard "Countess"! Isn't it enough that poor Jemmy was born moon-struck and made stage-struck, but they must get him love-struck to crown it all?'

'Sir,' I tell him, 'do not take this infatuation too

seriously. He will not be for long at one time in New York because, as *Deadly Deaf Burke, The Red-Handed Slayer of Simon Byrne,* he is engaged to spar in exhibitions in various parts of the country. Also, as you well know, he is to fight two serious battles, each for a considerable purse. We must—'

'—Lemons!' says Mr Jack, with indescribable vehemence, applying himself assiduously to the brandy. 'It only wanted lemons!'

'—We must procrastinate a little, sir, for his own sake; put him off, hold back his money in a fiduciary capacity, keep him otherwise occupied.'

'Oh, go home,' says Mr Jack, 'I smell bad luck.'

'Strangely enough, sir, I do not.'

'Oh, you!' says he. 'Death smells sweet to a vulture.'

Further discussion being useless I went home, leaving Mr Jack to his sombre thoughts and his brandy, gnawing and burning a cigar to death rather than smoking it.

Now the ancient play-writers were much given to the use of a device called the *Deus ex Machina* by means of which, having gotten his hero into some situation from which no human ingenuity can extricate him, the author sends a deity to rescue him by supernatural means. We moderns scorn this device and rightly so, because on the stage it is too improbable, too contrived; yet in everyday life it is in constant use for the benefit, or otherwise, of real people. So, the narrator dare not copy life as it is lived for fear of being accused of over-dramatization. . . . There, you see? Even I find myself apologizing in advance for a plain statement of certain events that took place the very next day.

I was taking Deaf Burke for an airing, partly to point

out to him some of the beauties of New York City, and partly to show New York City the phenomenon of Deaf Burke in a scarlet coat, canary-coloured waistcoat and Scotch plaid trousers.

He attracted considerable public attention, sir, and was followed by numbers of men and boys of an indigent description; among them, ignoring my advice, he carelessly distributed a pocketful of small money. I led him off the main thoroughfare into the aristocratic seclusion of Gramercy Park, but the rabble followed him there and so clustered at our heels that Burke finally turned upon them and said:

'Look 'ere, youse, I'm all out o' tanners' – meaning sixpenny pieces – 'but this 'ere's a quid' – holding up a golden sovereign.

At this, the mob sets up a great roar which Deaf Burke easily tops with his waterman's shout, crying, '—'Old 'ard! Now then, gen'lemen, I'm a-goin' to toss this 'ere Jimmy-O'-Goblin right acrost the vay, an' you shall play scramblers for it. Eh? Right! Now one, a-two, a-three – an' avay!'

With this, the reckless booby flips the gold coin twenty feet in the air in a glittering arc, and there is pandemonium as the crowd goes after it like a herd of bison. A police officer, coming upon the scene and seeing the mêlée, puts his leaden whistle to his lips and blows a terrific blast – as luck will have it, right in the ear of a nervous horse which is coming around the corner drawing a calèche driven by an awkward young man. Horse rears, takes bit between teeth and bolts.

Now, coming in our direction, there is a stout, respectable nursemaid pushing one of those little go-carts in which infants ride who are not yet able to walk. She is

accompanying a lady by whose side walks a sturdy boy of seven years or so, wearing a tasselled cap and carrying a hoop. The tumult seems to snatch this little group up and cast them aside like a whirlwind. The lady clutches the boy to her breast and shrinks back against some railings, covering him with her body; but the nursemaid, losing all presence of mind, throws her apron over her head and screams, letting go of the baby's carriage which rolls out of reach with the child in it, straight into the path of the frantic runaway horse.

All this in a moment: and in this same moment Deaf Burke, who could instantaneously and with a cat-like instinct master any unexpected physical situation, bounds forward head down, as he did when he fouled Bendigo; grasps the handles of the baby's carriage and with miraculous dexterity gets it and himself clear, ducking under the belly of the furious horse!

Then, cool as you please, he wheels the child back and says to the lady, ' 'Ere y'are' – whereat she grasps him by his lavender-gloved hands and cries, 'Heroic man!'

But I, who had prudently found a safe distance from which to witness this scene – for he who cannot help should not stay to be a hindrance – whistled Burke away and hurried him into a cab. Gramercy Park now was the scene of something like a riot. And I did not want to be involved.

. . . Foolish of me? Well, I was still young. Had my circle of literary acquaintances been as wide then as it is now, I would have laid out twenty dollars and had an account of Deaf Burke's heroism homerically described in six columns and illustrated with a cut in every New York newspaper! . . .

As it was, the police officer who had blown the whistle was promoted for having dispersed a mob of rowdy immigrants; which mob, I may say, had dispersed itself, rushing hot-foot in pursuit of an agile boy who had caught Burke's golden pound in mid-air.

How so be it, that same evening a mysterious gentleman muffled in a great black cloak lined with wine-coloured satin, and wearing a beaver hat of peculiar shape tilted over his eyes, came to Burke's hotel and, in a sepulchral whisper which you might have heard three streets away, demanded to see the Hero of Gramercy Park.

The manager was nonplussed, sir, for America has always been rich in heroes, and this was a particularly heroic period in our history. He said:

'Why then, sir, I have residing here Major Blackadder, the Hero of Pilfold Fork, and I have Colonel Hackney, the Hero of Chickahaha Falls; I have the Hero of Little Broken Neck, Brigadier General Monypenny, and I have Major General Omptedinck, the Hero of Katykill Falls; I have the Legless Hero of Glastonbury Pike, and I have the Limbless Heroine of Teaneck Corner. But the Hero of Gramercy Park I do not have at present' – somewhat in the manner of a storekeeper who says that he is fresh out of Rowland's Macassar Oil, but Slocum's brand is just as good.

Now I, happening to be in the lobby, recognized that cloak which cost sixty dollars, and that whisper, and that characteristic hat: for they could have belonged to nobody but the best Richard III that ever offered his kingdom for a horse – to none other than Junius Brutus Booth, the great actor, whom Edwin Forrest so deeply envied and detested.

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And he was evidently in search of Deaf Burke.

Well then, sir, all's grist that comes to my mill, so I conducted him to Burke's rooms, where that redoubtable dunderhead was cramming his broad feet into varnished boots, preparatory to calling on the Countess.

Throwing back his cloak and disclosing his strange, wild, staring face, Junius Brutus Booth lets out a sob that might have displaced the diaphragm of a lesser man, and cries:

'Preserver of my sons! Come to my arms!'

'Blow that for a lark!' says Burke, hopping backwards. 'Stand orf!' But Booth, having made his entrance, had to make his speech. . . .

And I wish I could remember it: it was Shakespearean, it was awful. Almost in blank verse, alternately sobbing and shrieking when he was not declaiming, he improvised an epic. Here one saw, against a thunderous and smoky background luridly lit with hellish fires, a demented populace, all eyeballs and teeth, dancing a bloody carmagnole; while in the foreground a full squadron of Kellermann's Dragoons came thundering down, with sparks flying from their hooves, fire flashing from their eyes, foaming like so many billows in a raging tempest, while a dauntless little Burke clasped a tender babe to his bosom and dared them to do their worst.

Sir, it was monumental, and when he paused for breath I was surprised to find myself applauding, while even Deaf Burke was wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his hand, and growling, 'Brayvo!' In conclusion Booth squeezes Burke's right hand and cries:

'You have saved three lives, gallant sir – mine, for I must have expired of grief, and those of my sons, Edwin and

John Wilkes, upon whom I dote: my arteries through which I pump the current of my genius to the Future! I am your slave, posterity is your debtor . . .' and so on and so forth; but he forgot to mention the lady.

Of course, I suppose Posterity really does owe some small debt of gratitude to me and to Deaf Burke; because the young boy has grown up to be my good friend, Mr Edwin Booth, perhaps the greatest actor in the English language – not that he was in any immediate danger that day – and the baby we saved from the horse is John Wilkes Booth, a fine performer at twenty, with a notable career before him in the Histories and Tragedies when he matures. . . . And so it came to pass that in the space of twenty-four hours Deaf Burke, that stage-struck and susceptible plaything of a wanton Fortune, fell in love, saved a valuable life and found himself on intimate terms with the two most famous actors in America, these two being mortal enemies: Forrest the most spitefully envious and Booth the most extravagantly eccentric man on or off the Stage. Yet in this miscellany of seemingly unrelated events, Mr Jack thought he saw one possible point of balance.

'It may be,' says he, 'that while gallivanting with this soi-disant Iroquois-Polish Countess, the Deaf 'Un may to some extent keep training; for I'm sure that waxen, flaxen *simulacrum* won't regard it as genteel for him to get *too* drunk.'

'There, you see? Soda cuts acid, and there are two sides to everything,' I tell him. But he sneers and, giving mock stage directions, says:

'Confused noise without. Enter Slops with a Moral. A Tucket sounds. . . . Oh, keep your brummagem opti-

mism where you keep your brass jewellery! . . . Any water is deep enough to drown a fool; and there are harder things to mend than broken training. . . . I simply mean that, between the three different pulls, we may keep Jemmy in a state something like equilibrium.'

'Why, sir,' I agree, 'we must keep Deaf Burke in condition to fight his quota of rounds, that is for sure.'

'Oh, ay,' he says, with the expression of a man who is trying to analyse a combination of evil odours, 'one must be able to stand up well in order to fall down convincingly. A man needs to be sober to fight a cross.'

Now a 'cross' is a term applied by the Fancy to a prize-fight in which a combatant who is backed to win deliberately loses, or allows the other man to win. It is a hard term, and I did not like it.

'Mr Jack,' I tell him, 'there is a twang of illegality in that word to which I must take exception. The first consideration is the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Sir, we are an ardent and a patriotic people, and the multitude will be naturally inspired by a desire to see a native warrior prevail and the invader fall. A prize-fight is not a war of principles: it is a spectacle, a display of skill and endurance. Come, sir, would you have a tight-rope walker really miss his footing every time he pretends to stumble? Would you accuse an actor of false pretences because he makes you cry over a tragedy that is not real? Why, in having Deaf Burke defeated in the thirtieth round by the Erie Strong Boy, after an equal battle, we elevate the Ring almost to the level of the Stage, and everybody is happy.'

'Except the losing bettors,' says Mr Jack.

'That, sir, is their concern. If people desire to gamble, they must take the consequences.'

'Oh, ay, to be sure! But I dare swear you'll have your few dollars on the Erie man,' says he, with a harsh laugh.

'That will not be gambling,' I remind him.

And such, in fact, was the case.

Deaf Burke was to fight three matches in America: one he was to be allowed to win; but there were two that it was agreed he must lose, and his fight with the Erie Strong Boy was one of the last-named. For, you see, the Erie Strong Boy was a Swede named Larsen, and so there was little sentimental feeling where he was concerned; but Burke is an Irish name, and a large proportion of the crowd would be Irish. The Press had not contradicted the general assumption that, since Deaf Burke had defeated Simon Byrne, he was the Irish Champion, and therefore the betting would be heavy in his favour. Hence, the odds would be about three to one against the Erie Boy who, though a powerful and tenacious man, would be no match for the tigerish Burke in a haphazard, undirected battle. Thus, those of us who were 'in the know', as the saying goes, had money invested *against* Burke, because he had his instructions to fail to come up to the scratch for round thirty-one. And while in private life he was at least as much of a fool as I have described him to be, in the ring Deaf Burke could be uncommonly smart and reliable.

I would not have you think that I was a mere gambler, sir.

Well, then, I went with Burke to meet the Countess and her aunt at the modest but respectable boarding-house where their straitened circumstances forced them to reside, and the four of us went in a carriage to see Edwin Forrest in *Coriolanus*. And that evening, my dear sir, I saw a most

edifying instance of the triumph of the Tender Passion over man's common clay.

Burke was quiet. . . . But in Drury Lane, when another Coriolanus had addressed the citizens as a 'common cry of curs', Burke, thinking the actor's finger was pointing directly at him, had thrown his hat onto the stage in the traditional pugilist's challenge, and had offered to knock his head off for a shilling. . . .

Now, when Forrest declaimed this memorable speech, Burke explained to the Countess in his piercing whisper, 'It's all right, me lydy. 'E's only a-actin', like, see? 'Im an' me's *prals*' – meaning close friends.

To my pleased surprise he was docile as a lamb, and when he saw Forrest after the play, Burke grasped him by the hands and said, very earnestly:

'Honest, guv, vy *shouldn't* I 'ave a go at the Romans?'

'First you must fight your real battles,' says Forrest, 'then we shall see about the mock ones.'

'I'm much obleeged to yer, master,' says Burke. 'That 'ere Brutish Booth—'

'—Ha-ha-ha!' roars Forrest. 'Brutish Booth! Oh, very good, very good indeed! Brutish Booth, hey? Well, what of him?'

'Vy, betwixt 'im and youse, I'm come the jolly old Shylocks yet!'

'If you have the patronage of so illustrious an artist as Mr Booth,' says Forrest, his mouth like a clam just closing, 'you have little need of a poor mountebank like me.'

'Never you mind vot they say,' says Burke, 'I bet a pound you can jump 'igher and roar a sight louder than vot 'e can!'

At supper the Countess was very quiet. She was trying

very bravely to be cheerful, but from time to time she heaved a deep sigh, and only half-heartedly pecked her way through a lobster, a young duckling and a sweet omelette. At last, very tenderly, Deaf Burke asks:

'Vot's to do, me lydy? Out vith it, me dear, and if so be I can 'elp, I vill.'

The Countess shakes her head, but the Baroness says, 'It cannot be helped, sir. She—'

'—Do not tell him, Aunt!' cries the Countess.

'Oh, nonsense, my darleeng. She has been suddenly parted from her Félice,' says the Baroness to Burke, in a deep, hollow voice.

'Vell, can't you 'ook it up, then, or tie a knot in it?' he asks.

'Félice is the name of a leetle dog,' says the Baroness, and the Countess blushes.

And it comes out that Félice is a rare breed of lapdog called a Warsaw Poodle: the last of the Countess's possessions that was of any value. She had to sell it to pay the rent. But soon, no doubt, money will arrive from Poland, and she will buy it back; but in the meantime, her heart is sore, and she is desolate and lonely. Then, unable to contain her grief, she bursts into tears, and the Baroness, with a gentleness surprising in such a dragon of high tragedy, kisses her and cossets her, and says:

'There, there, leetle flower,' etcetera, etcetera.

'Ve'll see about that 'ere li'l dawg,' growls Burke, deeply moved.

And he saw about it, for the next day the Countess had her Félice again: the first and, I trust, the last Warsaw Poodle I ever lay eyes on.

It cost the love-bemused Burke thirty dollars, which he

gave the Baroness for the repurchase and, in my opinion, it was not worth thirty cents; but the object of a sincere affection is priceless, and I am no connoisseur of dog-flesh. The animal was, to my eye, all out of focus, small as it was. But the Countess explained very prettily that a Warsaw Poodle's head had to be disproportionately large to contain its almost human intelligence, its feet had to be as big as a man's fists to support it on the treacherous marshes of the River Vistula, and its tail had to drag along the ground, for by means of this appendage the sagacious creature left a trail to guide travellers lost in the swamps; also, it enabled the stranger to tell which end of the dog was which, for it was excessively hairy.

However, I had no doubt that the look of gratitude she bestowed upon Burke was worth every cent it cost him. But this was not to be the end of the matter. He was to pay dear for the Countess's looks of gratitude and her little cries of joy; for upon my honour, sir, he neither received nor asked anything more of her. Even if he had, they were never alone together for more than a few minutes at a time; the Countess never went unchaperoned by her grim but affectionate aunt, the Baroness.

The three of them frequently took morning walks together, and it was surprising how often the Countess recognized, in this or that shop window on Broadway, some valuable little article which had once been her property but which poverty had forced her to sell for a song! There were, in one day, an ancestral sable muff and tippet, a gold vinaigrette, and a carnelian seal ring. Burke spent his money gladly, and when his pockets were empty, came to me for more, which I advanced him upon his American earnings at a reasonable rate of interest on note of hand.

Yes, I discounted many an *X* of his then. I brought the matter up when Mr Jack and I were going into accounts.

'Mr Burke is five hundred dollars deep in my books,' I tell him.

He is uncivil, as usual, saying:

'Oh, stop your death tick, you triple-faced usurious little mumping pilgarlick! You stand to get two thousand by this fight alone, let alone your percentages and your perquisites and your pickings. If the boy weren't wasting his money in this way, he would be frittering it away in a worse. As it is, he drinks not above half a pint of brandy a day, has not been drunk for a week and gets up early to go walking with that candle-grease image of his and that whalebone rack of false hair' – which was his way of alluding to the Countess and the Baroness – 'and that's high training for the Deaf 'Un. He isn't hurt up to now – cross your fingers and whistle – and with luck he won't be.'

'The love of a good woman—'

'—Good woman, your granny! She's sly enough to know that if she permitted him the slightest freedom, bang would go the illusion, and he'd be off like a shot. And who'd get the dollars then? He's only being rooked a little, which is nothing to a fellow who was born with somebody else's hand in his pocket. So if this is the worst of it, long live Love! – *if* this is the worst of it. . . . Let him have what he wants, up to another thousand dollars.'

At this point, enter another interesting character in the shape of Darby Whalen, Esquire: such a crackling brown leaf of a man in his tobacco-coloured suit, with such a cured and folious skin, that when he took snuff he might have been pollinating rather than refreshing himself, and his busy little black eyes might have been hard, shiny

beetles threatening the luxuriance of his herbaceous white eyebrows.

A kind of banker, you would have said, or perhaps a trustworthy old family lawyer, or both; and you would have been wrong, for he had come from Galway in 1790 without a coat to his back, a journeyman carpenter, and now he was one of the richest and most respected figures in sporting circles in New York. Not an important match was fought or run, be it by men, dogs, chickens or horses, but Darby Whalen, Esquire, had his brittle old finger in it.

'Our boy,' says he, seating himself with a dry rustle, and pinching common rappee out of a gold snuff-box decorated with a naughty miniature by Boucher surrounded with diamonds, 'Our boy will be half-way to Poughkeepsie by dinner-time if he goes on as he's going on.'

'What the *Aitch* do you mean, sir?' cries Mr Jack.

'Why,' says Darby Whalen, with a laugh like a straw mattress made articulate, 'the way he's demonstrating his prowess at the oars to his lady-friends in a skiff on the river, then! By the Powers, I've seen 'em all, big and little, large and small, but never yet did I see a pug a-straining at his training in sky-blue swallowtails, a brocade weskit and a beaver hat! Nor did I ever see a cleaner boy at all to keep his condition than ours. Small wonder the odds on him are lengthening. Ireland forever!'

'The Deaf 'Un is a Cockney born and bred,' says Mr Jack, in something like disgust, 'and it's your own fellow-countrymen that are to lose their hard-gotten silver when he goes down. What are you talking about?'

'Why, don't you see, Mr Jack, dear, that as soon as one of my as yet unenlightened countrymen gets hold of a

dollar he's all the poorer for it, for he'll surely spend it on drink to buy himself a headache or worse; whereas Ireland is the richer for my winning, for a proportion of my gains goes to the Temperance Mission and to the Famine Relief Fund – if so be there's anything left after I've underwritten my expenses,' says Darby Whalen, Esquire, 'for there is a calculated risk, is there not, Mr Twatchman?'

'I am not a gambling man, sir.'

Mr Jack grunts, 'Nay. He casts his bread upon the waters – on a strong hook. . . . What'll you take, Whalen?'

'Ah, I'm not a drinking man, Mr Jack. I don't hold with it, for it's the curse of Ireland. But my doctor prescribes a glass of whisky-and-water, half-and-half, much as I loathe the stuff, for my bilious tracts. . . .'

Then, taking his medicine with wonderful fortitude, ' 'Twill be a black day for some when Deaf Burke drops at the thirtieth round, and here's wishing some of us better luck next time. . . . And by your leave I'll drink just another little glass of the Creature to poor Mr Randolph Wotanoke – here's comfort to him, for he'll be needing it, and may this lesson teach him caution!'

Mr Randolph Wotanoke was an amiable but credulous young gentleman from Albany, recently the inheritor of a substantial fortune: what is vulgarly known as a 'sucker', sir. I had vague hopes of interesting him in some satisfying theatrical ventures before he wasted his substance in pugilism and horse-racing.

'Lesson?' I ask.

'The lad has ten thousand on Burke to win,' says Darby Whalen, 'and as an especial favour, in the strictest confi-

dence, I let him have odds of two to one. Oh to be a hero, and worshipped as such the way Wotanoke worships Deaf Burke! Ah well, gentlemen, one man's loss is another man's gain, and it cannot be otherwise. Never was such betting on a minor match!'

'What if the Irishmen break the ring?' asks Mr Jack.

'Let 'em, the darlings; for the match will be won and lost by that time. And we and our man will be well away before they decide to tear him to pieces for losing,' says Darby Whalen. 'And in a few hours it will be as the shadow of a dream, barring a few cracked skulls in the crowd, which are inevitable at any prize-fight, straight or cross. Be easy, be easy! Have I been in the sporting racket forty years for nothing?'

'You wouldn't be anywhere forty minutes for nothing,' says Mr Jack; whereat Darby Whalen, Esquire, smiling as at a high compliment, seems to crackle all over like a stale cigar. And so, a few last details of business settled, exit in an aromatic flutter.

'I don't suppose that triturated goblin is up to any monkey-business?' says Mr Jack, when he is gone.

'I cannot see how, Mr Jack.'

'Neither can I, but I smell trouble, I repeat.'

'But, Mr Jack, Darby Whalen, Esquire, is in with us many thousands deep, and holding a book for many thousands more,' I remonstrate. 'Consider, sir: ten dollars wagered on the Erie Boy to beat Burke will get you fifty. Ten dollars on Burke to win will get you two. And Burke must lose. Where's the arithmetic of your misgivings, Mr Jack?'

'The heart needs no accountant, you actuarial owl,' says he. 'Damn the dollars and the moralities too! It is simply

that there is something in the air that ought not to be in the air, and I fear for my Deaf 'Un.'

'We shall have him in the country in twenty-four hours,' I offer, wondering at the tortuous ethics of this strange man, so intimately involved in the shadier side of the most callously brutal game in the world, and yet so tenderly thoughtful of one of its shadiest and most brutally callous players. 'You need not fear for him, Mr Jack.'

'Oh, I suppose it's a poor man indeed that hasn't somebody or other to fear for,' he says, drinking some brandy. 'And if there's no reason for fear, he must needs invent one.' Then, with a curt laugh, 'Ay, I must be a desperate fellow indeed, if I have come down to looking for lost lambs in Jemmy Burke's black Siberia!'

I was not sorry when Burke returned, glowing with exercise and love; for Mr Jack's uneasiness was beginning to infect me, so that I seemed to see out of the corner of my eye a picture hanging awry on a wall where there were no pictures, while at the same time I was haunted by an empty fear that I had forgotten something important.

'Pulled your arms out of joint?' asks Mr Jack, sourly.

'Vy, not me. I've been a-practisin' on my jolly old larboard-starboard,' says Burke, demonstrating on the ambient air.

I should mention that a fighter can never lose certain muscular movements essential to the work he first got his bread by; so, a blacksmith has a long steady left, and a smashing right, and so has a bricklayer, but Deaf Burke had a very deadly series of hooked punches, which he quite properly called his 'larboard-starboard'.

Imagine that you have a pair of oars in your hands, and are sharply turning a heavy boat to your left, or larboard

side: you will pull the left hand towards you, and simultaneously push the right away from you. Assume these hands to be clenched fists, your left taking your opponent in the nape of the neck, while your right strikes him almost simultaneously on the point of the jaw. Reverse this process, as if you were turning your boat to the starboard, or right. Repeat it, and there you have Burke's larboard-starboard gambit, if I may so call it – a fearsome thing indeed, with Burke's herculean power and deadly skill behind it. It was this that killed Simon Byrne, I am told.

'You'll not be needing much of your larboard-starboard at Harlem next week,' says Mr Jack.

'Oh, I'm fly, guv'nor. I'm wise,' says Burke, tapping the side of his nose.

'This way, you go home with money in your pocket,' says Mr Jack, 'and you are your own landlord in your own musical public house down Soho way—'

'—Vith a reg'lar Music Room and a jolly little styge at the back,' says Burke.

'Ay, and play your Caesars, and your Shylocks, and your Coriolanuses to your heart's content!'

'An' a Fives Court for sparrin' an' the Noble Art, for the Nobility an' Gentry! But blow skittles, though – them's wulgar, eh? Not for the Nobs, eh?'

'Absolutely.'

Mr Jack watches with satisfaction while Burke eats up a forty-ounce steak, talking with his mouth full; and he gives me a glance which seems to say, 'At least love has not taken away his appetite.'

'Or perhaps not in Soho,' says Mr Jack, 'but closer to Charing Cross, somewhere by St Martin's Lane, nearer the theatrical district.'

'That's it! An' 'ave a Club – the Sportin' an' Theatrical, eh, vot say?'

'Why not just Burke's?' cries Mr Jack. 'There's White's, there's Almack's, there's Brooks's, there's Watier's, there's Crockford's, there's Boodle's – then why not Burke's?'

'Vy not indeed?' demands Burke, immensely excited. 'Vot could be more genteel? I'll be a gen'lman yet, eh?'

'Damme, King George IV made Dan Donnelly a Knight, and he was a common prize-fighter and the scum of the Liffey!' says Mr Jack.

'Ay-ay! A Jack-Knight! And vot might *'is* vife be a-called by?'

'My Lady, by Jingo!'

'Ah, ah! – There, then, there! – An' vich is the 'igher, a Countess or a Lydy?'

'Why, you numbskull, the Queen herself can be no greater than a true lady!' exclaims Mr Jack.

And just then, observing a kind of contagion of enthusiasm, I believed I saw a clue to the mystery of his curious attachment to Deaf Burke: poor Mr Jack's tired soul drew assurance from the superabundant vitality of the other man. Burke's airiness was his spiritual buoy, Burke's earthiness was his anchor. But now, catching himself short, he says, sharply:

'Go and lie down, Deaf 'Un. Rest till supper.'

And when Burke, muttering in wonderment, 'Cor cook me vi' spinach and call me gammon,' obeys like a lamb, Mr Jack sighs and says to me:

'The poor devil has got it bad, Lord pity him!'

I ask, 'Can such a man really and truly fall in love at first sight?'

'What, you Slops, does a man have to fill in a triple form before he is hit with an arrow?'

'But Burke's passion seems to elevate him, sir!'

'Ay, you mount the gallows for the long drop,' says he, and so withdraws into a dignified, brandied gloom.

And there was, in fact, something of a gallows atmosphere at supper that evening. Burke's last night out before the fight: it might have been Burke's last night on earth, for we were not so much a company at table, as a few individuals making conversation in order *not* to say something.

There was Deaf Burke, of course, reduced to mashed potatoes and buttermilk by love, handling his cutlery like a cow with a musket, as the saying goes; and there was Mr Jack, wielding a quiet knife and fork, and looking at us all in turn as if he could see behind our eyes and was put off his food by what he saw. There was young Mr Randolph Wotanoke, silly with shyness, along with a young lady named Miss Robina Darcy-Darcy; she being the daintiest little creature imaginable this side the midgets, five foot nothing, but charmingly formed though on the slight side, yet possessed of a clarion-call of a voice and a personality to match it. She was well-known and respected, at that time, as our leading Ariel, Puck or Little Prince Arthur. She had soft golden hair and violet eyes.

This pair had come with Darby Whalen, Esquire, and his young wife – his third – Deirdre: a fine strapping young lady with dark red hair, whose talk was exclusively of death and ghosts.

The Baroness was even stiffer and grimmer than usual; armour-plated, as it seemed, in a black satin dress with a

sort of medieval gorget of black beads, and forbidding in her mittens. The Countess also wore black, but it emphasized her blondness, sir, it matched her eyes – sir, in a word, it became her.

'We are thus attired,' says she, in her pretty accent, 'in memory of my great grandfazaire. 'E was murdaired by ze Cossacks.'

More sepulchral than usual, peeling an orange, the Baroness adds, 'He was skeened alive and thwown into a swamp. His ghost still gwoans undergwound; bubbles awise; there ees a ghostly light.'

Now Mrs Deirdre, in her element, comes up with how she has seen with her own two eyes, as sure as she is a living sinner, the Headless Horsewoman Mara Rouh; and has heard with her own two ears the hissing voice of Cackling Biddy, who for her own sins was turned into a goose; and inhaled with her own two nostrils the miasma of Foul Phelan, who for his crimes was condemned to wander the bogs till doomsday in the form of vapour.

And so, over the dessert, one spectre leads to another, until Miss Robina takes the Baroness's hand, and says to her:

'How fortunate your niece is to have you to protect her – for you are so brave and strong, Baroness! And I am an unprotected girl.'

Kindly, the Baroness pats her cheek, and says, 'There, there, my child. What spiwit would harm one so pwetty? You would warm the heart even of a cold ghost.'

The Countess who, for all her aristocratic hauteur, is, it seems, woman enough not to relish a compliment paid to another of her sex – even by her aunt – shrugs disdainfully and says to Burke:

'*I* should not be afraid of ghosts if *you* were near, Meestair Bourrrka. *You* are my hero—' rolling half a dozen *R*'s into the noun '—*you* have no fear!'

'All men know fear, I think,' says Darby Whalen.

'I never met one who did not, with the possible exception of the Deaf 'Un,' says Mr Jack.

'That's right,' says Burke.

'I have seen everything, and have nothing to hope for here or hereafter, and yet I know fear,' says Mr Jack.

' 'Tis but human,' says Darby Whalen.

Suddenly bold, after the manner of shy men, Mr Wotanoke blurts, 'I'll lay nine to four you couldn't frighten Deaf Burke, sir!'

'That's right, guv!' says Burke.

'Give me the opportunity to take him unawares, and I'll take you in hundreds!' cries Darby Whalen. 'For given time and place, there's no mother's son I couldn't scare for a second or two.'

'I never 'ad a mother as I knows on, if seein's believin',' says Burke.

'Time limit, sir?' asks Mr Wotanoke.

'Any time within the next three weeks, and in the presence of witnesses,' says Darby Whalen, Esquire.

'Done!'

And so, while Burke sat by, unconcerned as an ox at a fair, the parties settled the terms of a bet that has found a niche in the unrecorded history of New York.

According to these terms, of course, Burke was not to be privy to the details, which were later arranged by Darby Whalen and myself, after Mr Jack had carried Burke away to make an appearance of training in the country. Together with Burke's old sponge-holder, whom

I have not mentioned hitherto because, to all intents and purposes, he had no known existence except at the ringside, they stopped at the Eagle Inn, by the Harlem River. Deaf Burke hated the countryside, sir; he said that the rural quiet of Harlem gave him 'the creaks'.

If, mooning at the Countess, he had in any way heeded the wager, all memory of it was eradicated from his mind in a few hours. In any case, as Mr Jack sagely remarked to me:

'The Totally Unexpected strikes too quick to scare one: it is the Expected happening at the wrong moment that most demoralizes a man.'

So we decided to put Burke's fearlessness to the test about three days after his arrival at the Eagle Inn, and for our coadjutor we had no less a man than Junius Brutus Booth himself; nothing was above or below the dignity of this truly eccentric genius, and to some slight extent his professional pride was touched.

'For,' said he, 'if there is any man-Jack alive that I cannot put the everlasting fear of *Thud* into if I choose, upon my honour as an officer of the Royal Navy and a gentleman I'll cut my own liver out with Cassius's sword and eat it raw!'

It was settled one night, very late, when Burke was fast asleep. Mr Booth had come down very quietly somewhat earlier, and we others forgathered in Mr Jack's room, where the great actor made ready.

He takes off coat, shoes and neckcloth, and whitens his hands and face with a sickly, livid paint. Then he pulls on a low-cut, cropped reddish wig, and covers his front teeth with black wax, so that they appear to have been knocked out. After that, he puts on a stained shroud, and

distorts his countenance so horribly that even I, sitting three feet away in the lamplight, cannot repress a shudder, and Mr Jack himself growls, 'Hideous!'

'A mere nothing,' says Mr Booth; and proceeds to paint one eye over with a frightful bruise, and spatter his cheeks with a blood-coloured fluid out of a bladder.

This, too, is not enough: he takes a quantity of common salt in a saucer, pours brandy over it, sets fire to it, and turns down the lamp. The effect is indescribable, for the flame of burning brandy and salt has the property of destroying all the natural tints of flesh, so that they give place to a dreadful leaden hue that even death cannot match.

'Now,' says he; and, taking the flaming saucer, he leads the way to Burke's chamber, we following tip-toe in our stocking feet.

Booth opens the door silently. Burke lies there, gently snoring, and smiling in his sleep. Twisting his visage until it seems that there can be no bones in his head, Mr Booth lets out a cry so forlorn that my hair stood up at the sides of my head, and so loud that all the dogs of the neighbourhood joined in a ragged chorus, while the very owls shrieked in terror.

Burke awakes and sees the apparition. 'Vot the Devil's to do?' he asks.

'Jemmy Burke, Jemmy Burke, I am the ghost of Simon Byrne whom you killed!' says Mr Booth, in a voice that seems to come from a deep, damp, echoing corridor. Burke sits up at this.

'Vell, Simon,' says he, 'I'm wery sorry, I'm sure, because I didn't go for to do it. I don't mind a-tellin' you, youse came nigh on a-doin' o' the same by me. Eh?'

'Look on me, Jemmy Burke!'

'Vell, so I do, Simon. You trimmed your whiskers, I see, but all the same you *do* look porely, ol' feller.'

'You slew me, Jemmy Burke!'

'Vell, I said I vos sorry, didn't I? You'd be surprised vot trouble I come nigh on gettin' into a'cause on you!'

'Repent, repent!'

'Repent yerself, Simon – it ain't none o' my fault as you never learned to guard yer 'ead, now is it?'

'Beware!'

'Orl right, orl right. Never say die, eh? Live an' let live, eh? Better luck next time. But if so be you're one o' them 'ere ghosties kind o' in the plays, like, an' you knows vhere some o' that 'ere buried treasure is a-'idden of – vell, the Fancy's money is on me. A vord to the vise, eh?'

So Mr Booth makes himself disappear, with a parting yell; and, resuming his natural appearance, is not certain whether to be mortified or amazed.

'I have converted atheists with less,' he swears. 'Yes, the fellow *must* be more than human!'

But Darby Whalen, Esquire, says to Mr Jack and me in private:

'Gentlemen, by the Nine Blind Sons and the Seven Wet Orphans – a fellow that can give the bunko-steer in the dead of night to the ghost of the man he killed – *argh*, but that is the boy for me! . . . A word to the wise! My con-science!'

And next morning, at breakfast, Burke asks, casually:

'I don't suppose as you 'appened to notice a bit o' a ghostie a-flitterin' about last night? I did.'

Mr Jack tells him, 'That was gammon, Deaf 'Un. It was a rig, for a bet, to see if you'd be scared.'

'Vot odds?' asks Burke.

'Nine to four you'd never scare.'

' 'Ow did you bet?'

'That you wouldn't.'

'Vy,' says Burke reproachfully, 'vy didn't you gi' me the office? Bet on the cross? I'd a screamed like a babby. As it vas, I thought it vas a real ghostie.'

'I wanted to win this bet.'

'But vy take a chance on vinnin' four, when you could 'a got nine for a cert'nty?'

'You don't bet on the cross against what you hope for,' says Mr Jack.

'All I know is, nine's better nor four,' says Burke. 'You're a rum 'un!'

'Deaf 'Un, sometimes nine is worse than four. . . . Did you ever hear of Limbo?'

'I 'eard on Bingo, in the song; an' I knows a cove they call Pongo – but I don't know no Limbo.'

'Limbo is where babies go when they die before they learn to cry.'

'Anon, anon, guv?' asks Burke, meaning, *Well, what of it?*

'I shall yet catch a glimpse of you through my brimstone smoke, blissfully floating in eternal sleep in your ethereal jar of invincible ignorance, you slobber of unfermented mash!'

'That's right, guv.'

And now, although this was not to be one of his advertised contests, visitors began to arrive thick and fast. The famous Hassall Partridge came with sketch-block and crayon to draw Burke's likeness, and Hayden the sculptor drew his torso for the Young Hercules. A noted phrenolo-

gist felt his head, and was none the worse for it. The Countess and her aunt drove out twice that week with Darby Whalen, Esquire, and Mr Randolph Wotanoke with Miss Robina; so that Deaf Burke had ample to occupy him in the way of innocent diversion.

One morning, when Mr Jack and the younger gentlemen had taken the ladies out to enjoy the air, Darby Whalen, Esquire, sat with me 'to tidy away the loose ends of the business,' as he puts it. So, snapping a green leather notebook with gilt edges, he says:

'Well, my boy, and there's another sporting print all ready, bar the framing. The Erie Boy is safe and sound, and he thinks he may win fair and above-board, too, for he's the sort that would rather take home an honest broken jaw than a bag of gold on the crook. Oh ay, he will fight to win – and win he shall, and win he must, though it's little he knows it, unless he chances to break a leg or be struck by the lightning. But he is guarded night and day, for, do you know, I stand to lose a cool hundred thousand dollars if he drops?'

Appalled by the magnitude of this sum, I can only gasp, 'Every cent Mr Jack and I can manage is on the Erie Boy, sir.'

'I know it, my boy, I know it; or else do you think I'd be sinful enough to trust you?'

'No sir, no.'

'Don't I know, my dear, that you are risking your life along with your money, too, in a town where strong men's throats have been cut for the sake of the coats off their backs, let alone a hundred thousand dollars? Is it not proverbial in New York City that mysterious Providence smites anyone sinfully foolish enough to put the Double-

Cross upon Darby Whalen in such a manner as to turn the stomach of the Coroner himself? . . . Ah, here comes the darling himself, bless him!'

Enter, severally, Burke's party: first, the Baroness, robed in bruise-coloured mauve, with Miss Robina, all in blue and with a campanulaceous bonnet, affectionately clinging to her waist; behind, in dull rose taffeta shot with grey, looking distraught, the Countess arm-in-arm with Burke; in rear, separate, Messrs Jack and Wotanoke. The Countess says:

'Auntie dearest, we must take our leave.'

'Yes, Victowia, my leetle flower,' says the Baroness.

Then Mr Wotanoke takes up Miss Robina; and the Countess, catching Deaf Burke by the lapels, to everyone's astonishment imprints a firm kiss upon that hero's battered cheek, at which he blushes red as fire – and is about to return the compliment, when the Baroness says, in an awful voice:

'Victowia! Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'You are my hero, my *hero*, my *HERO!*' cries the Countess to Burke, with an angry look at her aunt.

To the company at large, the Baroness says frigidly, 'My niece ees vewy emotional today – she ees not well. She ees excited, hystewical.'

'Cor souse me in onion sauce an' call me biled mutton!' mutters Burke, touching his cheek gingerly where he has been kissed, as if a bee had stung him there.

And so the little party breaks up, in an atmosphere of something too strained to be easy.

During the next few days my business kept me constantly in the city, and it happened that the day before the fight my affairs took me to Philadelphia where they com-

pelled me to remain more than forty-eight hours.

Thus, I was forcing my nervously constricted throat to admit passage of a piece of veal at Arthur's Steak House when the news reached me – sir, my gullet snapped tight on that forkful of meat like a half-split log when the wedge slips, and the very memory of that moment brings back a certain lumpy and constricted sensation – for there, in smudged grey print, I read:

! ! ! ERIN ERADICATES ERIE ! ! !
! ! Burke Batters The Big Boy ! !
! A Lesson For Larsen !

Sir, I am tolerably well acquainted with Literature in its more thunderous and emotional forms, but I do not believe that Shakespeare and Milton could have done justice to my feelings at that moment. I will not harrow you, or rather bore you, with the matter-of-fact report on the fight round by round. First blood went to Burke, first round to the Erie Boy. Then followed a display of pugilistic skill which dazzled even the most hardened of the Fancy.

Deaf Burke made something like applicated cut-work embroidery of his big adversary, as one witness said. A certain sense of delicately measured ruthlessness is conveyed in most of the accounts I have heard. Another witness said that Burke seemed to go at the Erie Strong Boy like a sculptor making a monkey out of a block of granite: chip, chip, chip, a pause to contemplate the result, and in with hammer and chisel again. Yet, as often as not, when Larsen fell, it was Burke who happened to be on the grass beneath him, so that at the twenty-eighth round the score was even.

The Erie Boy won the twenty-ninth round, cross-buttocking Burke and falling heavily upon him; whereat a growling broke out among the Irishmen, but Darby Whalen, Esquire – who could foresee everything – had placed a plug-ugly guard of whippers-out about the ring to stop it being broken. So Burke got off his second's knee to come to scratch for the fateful thirtieth round, 'groggy and unsteady on his pins' to use the cant; and the Erie Strong Boy, though wretchedly battered, came forward with grim resolution. Whereupon Deaf Burke appeared to go into action like a box of fireworks, with his terrible larboard-starboard, starboard-larboard punches and, as the other man reeled, measured his distance and struck him on the point of the jaw.

The blow and the Erie Strong Boy's fall sounded, I was told, like the crack and the crash of a felled elm tree. Burke went meekly to his corner and sat on the old bottle-holder's knee, while what Mr Jack shouted at him was inaudible over the roar of the crowd. The Erie Boy, carried to his corner, lolled insensible on his second's knee, while others bit his ears, burned feathers under his nostrils, made him drink spirits of ammonia, touched the tip of his nose with a glowing cigar and applied the usual restoratives. But consciousness would not return.

Before *Time!* was called, Darby Whalen, Esquire, gave frantic orders to break the ring, break the ring at all costs! But he was too late. The verdict was unqestionably Burke's. Nominally, we were victorious.

But oh, the irony of it – the bitter, bitter irony of it! And oh, sir, the grisly effort of smiling thanks to the congratulations of the world, when you are in fact the wretched victim 'either of a labyrinthine conspiracy, or a

supernatural concatenation of ineluctable circumstances', as Pilkington puts it.

I was in a waking nightmare in which arithmetic paraded before in column of route, but out of step: left-right, right-left, larboard-starboard, starboard-larboard, credit-debit, debit-credit, until my mind reeled. I was damp with a cold fever. I imagined that the beetle-like eyes of Darby Whalen, Esquire, had legs and were chasing my disembodied soul to the thirty-two points of the compass, where it flitted, seeking the scattered portions of my anatomy, while a nasty little voice kept sniggering, '. . . By a Person or Persons Unknown, ha-ha; by a Person or Persons Unknown . . .'

Summing up, I decided that now was the time to look up some old acquaintances in New Orleans, where the climate was comparatively healthy. And I might have taken that boat, too, if a chance acquaintance had not startled me out of my wits as I was leaving the restaurant by slapping me on the shoulder and saying:

'Well then, Penitence Twatchman – and what do you think of Darby Whalen?'

'Think, sir? Think of Darby Whalen, sir?' I stammer. 'Why, then, what of Darby Whalen, sir?'

'Why, darn it, they say that you cannot take your money with you when you die, but trust old Darby Whalen to prove 'em liars! Don't tell me you haven't heard? He dropped with the apoplexy at the side of the ring when Deaf Burke beat the Erie Strong Boy yesterday – and it's out, now, that he had laid a fortune *against* the Deaf 'Un, the thundering old rascal!'

'Indeed, sir?'

'Indeed *and* indeed! And since a man's gambling debts die with him, just think of the money he's saved!'

'It is better to be born lucky than rich,' I say.

'All the same,' says my companion, ' 'tis better to be alive with eighteen pence than dead with a thousand pounds, as Benjamin Franklin has it.'

'True,' say I, 'but, as that same philosopher also said, fine words butter no parsnips.'

So I made haste to return to New York, to have it out with Mr Jack. I upbraided him. It was not what I said to him for I only said, 'Well, sir!' – it was the tone in which I said it, and the look I gave him.

'Well yourself!' he retorts. 'We've been done, and there's the beginning and the end of it.'

'But why, and for whose benefit?' I ask, bewildered. 'What had Burke to gain by a double-cross? Five hundred dollars of his own money were invested in the Erie Strong Boy. He stood to get three thousand by losing; to say nothing of long odds against himself when next he fights, and fights to win! He has cut his own throat along with ours.'

'It was Love,' says Mr Jack, 't'other day that Countess of Anaemia, or whatever she calls herself, kissed him and called him Hero – that did the trick. She expected him to win; and so, just to oblige, he won.'

'That's right, guv,' says Deaf Burke, coming into the room just then. 'She tol' me she vanted to see me in my glory as a conq'rin' 'ero. So vot's the odds?'

'Ask for money and you'll find out, 'says Mr Jack, grimly. 'You've chucked away three thousand dollars – that's what's the odds.'

'Vell, I don't know,' says Deaf Burke, counting with his

fingers, some nutshells and various fragments of broken pipe-stem. 'That 'ere Mr Votanoke promised me the odds on two thousand dollars if I von. 'E vas on at two to one. Two and two is . . . vun, two, three, four. Four' – paying out pipe-stem on the table.

'Wait a moment,' I say. 'Darby Whalen, Esquire, has died in the interim, and this cancels his gambling debts. He betted with Whalen.'

'Vy,' says Burke, in his engagingly simple manner, 'that 'ere's too bad; but Mr Votanoke never said nothink about vot 'e vas a-bettin', or who vith. All I knows is, I got vinnin' odds on two thousand a-comin' from that 'ere qvarter; an' '*e*'ll pay up, for '*e* ain't dead yet. Then Mr Junior Brutish Booth 'ad five thousand on me vith Moss Levy, at evens, an' '*e* promised me a thousand if I von. Four and one is five. . . . Five. Mr Forrest, '*e* got five to four from Levy, in thousands, an' '*e* vill gi' me five 'underd, for 'e don't like a-gamblin' . . . Now, four an' vun is five, an' 'alf a thousand is five 'underd.'

He lays out five bits of pipe-stem and a nutshell, while Mr Jack stares at me and I stare back. Then Burke astounds us with the following:

'An' over an' above it all, there's a matter o' three 'underd an' fifty as I betted on my own self vith the 'elp o' the landlord on that 'ere Eagle 'Otel, an' 'e's a listener at doors, '*e* is. 'E guv me threes to one, 'avin' over'eard the rig, don't yer see?'

'You bet on yourself?' I cry.

'Vot's three times three 'underd an' fifty? I can do that 'un vith oats. Send a boy for a cup o 'oats, vill yer?'

'A thousand and fifty,' says Mr Jack, dazed.

'Five thousand an' one is six. Six 'underd an' a fifty is

six-fifty. That 'ere makes six thousand, six 'underd, an' a fifty. Eh?'

'Are you telling us that you knew all along you were going to fight to win?' I ask, in horror.

'So 'elp me, guv, no!' says Burke, earnestly. 'I svear it.'

'Then what did you bet on yourself to win for?' asks Mr Jack.

'Fust, I vas a-gammoned into it by this 'ere landlord o' that 'ere Eagle 'Otel. Then, there vas kind o' insurance, like. I vas a-fightin' on the cross oright, an' the bettin' vas pretty 'eavy on me a-droppin', vasn't it? Vell, vot vas to pervent somebody else from a-nobblin' o' the Erie Cove? Vot signed an' sealed affydavy 'ad *I* got to prove as this 'ere Erie Cove ain't a wery leery cove in 'is own rights? 'Ow should I know as it ain't double-cross an' trible-cross an' four-way-cross too? Vy not? It's all in the game, ain't it?'

'By *Aitch*!' whispers Mr Jack, thunderstruck.

'Then again,' says Deaf Burke, 'there's chances on accidents – there's the 'iccups, there's slips an' there's slides, an' there's turned-over ankles. That's oright if it 'appens to me, but that 'ere Erie Cove ain't immortual, is 'e? So, it comes to this 'ere: if I loses I vins, an' if I vins I vins. An, so I vins; an' vot's more, that 'ere spotless angel a-dores of me for a-doin' on it. Anon, guv?'

'Ten thousand gibbering Barbary apes!' exclaims Mr Jack in wonderment, slapping his thighs.

'So vere's the loss, an' vere's the cross, on my part? *I* never vent to nobody an' made no deal: everything vas to be for my own good, says Mr Jack; an' this 'ere Twatchman says as it's to be a display o' walor an' a *ex*hibition, an' sich. Vell, it *'as* bin for my own good, an' it *vas* a

display an' all that 'ere; vasn't it? For that 'ere Erie Cove is big, two 'underd an' ten pound – vot ve calls fifteen stone in English – but 'e's got no more science nor a babby, an' I could 'a finished 'im in five minutes; eh? Vot's more, over an' above, I bags the goodvill o' the Forrestses an' the Boothses both at vun go – an' blyme me if'n I don't come the Friends-Romans-an'-Countrymen yet, by *Thud*!'

'Ten thousand gibbering Barbary apes on a square piano!' mutters Mr Jack. 'Better let me have half your winnings to hold for you, will you?'

'On course I vill, Mr Jack, dollar for dollar!' Then Burke leaves the room; and Mr Jack says to me:

'You know, of course, that the Deaf 'Un thinks I am taking his money to use for myself? He wouldn't dream of letting me hold it if he wasn't convinced that I am going to steal it from him. He no more expects to get anything back from me than a child does, when you present it with half a crown and his father pockets it, saying, "I'll save it up for you in case you lose it." '

I say, with absolute frankness, 'Why, sir, you are not a gracious gentleman, and not a very civil gentleman, and not a gentleman who goes out of his way to win affection; but I cannot see you making away with a penny-piece of anyone's money – let alone Deaf Burke's.'

'You are right, for once, Slops. Thank you.'

'Excuse me, Mr Jack; what was the significance of that remark you repeated about Barbary apes, etcetera?'

'Oh, some philosophical cove put it forward that if ten thousand Barbary apes were to pound ten thousand pianos for ten thousand years, they might hit upon a Beethoven sonata. Ten thousand monkeys picking up and dropping the shards and shadows of ten thousand ideas

and illusions in the Deaf 'Un's pandemoniac head, happened to hit upon sound sense. That's all.'

'Ah,' I agree, 'but I had not undertaken to cover the costs of his education, Mr Jack, sir.'

'We'll none of us lose, mark my words, Slops.'

On my way out, I encountered Deaf Burke. He was full of suppressed mirth.

'Happy to see you in such high spirits,' I say, drily.

'It's that 'ere Mr Jack,' says he. 'Vot a rum go it is, to be sure! Don't yer see, '*e* thinks as I *believes* that 'ere gammon about 'e's a-goin' to 'old 'alf that 'ere blunt for me!'

'You don't think he'd steal it?' I ask.

'Vy, on course I do! 'E's a thorough-paced gen'lman, see; so, if I up and says to 'im, "You an' me's prals, let's go 'alves, mate" – he'd be in *h*onour bound to refuse, but if so be 'e do's me a favour by a-losin' on it for me, like, all's fair an' sqvare an' no obligations. That's the gen'leманlike, delicate vay,' says Burke. 'Fust thing ven I gets 'ome an' starts my Club, I'm a-goin' to learn to write my name out proper vith a flourish: it's kind o' *shabby* to default over a blurry X.'

His reasoning was just a little too snarled and snagged for me, so I went about my business, which, in the course of the afternoon, took me to Mr Edwin Forrest's. That great artist, wrapped in a dressing-gown like a royal toga, was in high spirits.

'You see, Twatchman,' says he, 'I have foiled another dastardly plot against me!'

'I am delighted to hear it, sir. To which plot are you at present referring?'

'Why, *Aitch* and *Dee* – to the Deaf Burke plot, of course! I can tell you, now, that the myrmidons of those who

would undo me let it be whispered that Burke, the rogue, was to fall before the Erie Strong Boy, and I was sorely tempted to lay out money in that direction. But at the last moment, a certain lady – who shall be nameless – whispered in my ear that Mr Junius *Brutish* Booth had money on Burke to win. Upon my honour and integrity, and in the presence of my Creator, I swear that this clownish ruffian was imported from England especially to harass me, and with no other end in view! But I, too, have my spies in Canaan. Let Booth tremble! I have won the first trick – now I shall win the second, and the rubber!'

'What have you in mind, sir?' I ask, very uneasy.

He replies, rubbing his hands, 'Why, *Thud Dee* it – it is as easy as playing the guessing-game with a schoolboy for marbles. *Aitch*'s fire and *Dee*-nation, think you *I* do not know the workings of the theatrical mind in its greasiest, paintiest and crassest form? It is deduction, of the most elementary kind: *Brutish* Booth will pretend to back his henchman Burke to win again– I say, *pretend*! Booth will make a brave show of betting heavily on Burke ostentatiously, publicly; but, in secret, this galley-slave of the turbid Thames will have had his master's orders to lose. Is this clear? In secret, Booth will plunge heavily against Burke. Ha-ha-ha!'

'Forgive me, Mr Forrest, sir, but I don't catch the drift of this.'

'I am speaking of Burke's coming fight.'

'I did not know there was one immediately impending.'

'I know you don't. . . . But this very afternoon, Harry Lamb is going to challenge Deaf Burke to fight for a thousand dollars. *And Burke is going to win!* Now, do you see my point?'

'Yes, but—'

'—But nothing! I know I can trust you, Twatchman, because you have nothing to gain and everything to lose if you betray my confidence. Listen to me . . .'

And so I did. What else was there for me to do? If you find yourself caught in some delicate and dangerous piece of machinery, you keep still and hope for the best.

Plot and counterplot were meat and drink to Mr Edwin Forrest; life without intrigue was as an unsalted egg, and any situation which lacked deep and vibrant undertones was to him like an orchestra without a bassoon. He was pleased as Punch with his new stratagem for the discomfiture of his imaginary enemy, for his nature craved the strong red wine of hate. A word out of place might well have diverted his insatiable displeasure in my direction.

And I had my living to get, sir, I had my living to get!

Now Mr Forrest's wealthiest admirer – a magnate named Hamilton Pelleteer – was also an amateur of the Ring. He had seen Burke fight the Erie Strong Boy, and had formed the opinion Burke had won by a fluke.

'Harry Lamb would be more than a match for him,' said he to Mr Forrest.

Harry Lamb was a shrewd, experienced, dangerous fighter, who had defeated all comers in the region of Elizabeth, New Jersey; he was also known as the Lion of the Flock, and the Woolly Tiger, and was for the present working in Hamilton Pelleteer's stables.

'Match them, then, Mr Pelleteer,' said Mr Forrest.

'I should like to, Mr Forrest, but I detest these public exhibitions,' said Mr Pelleteer, who was well-known as being one of the most fastidious men in America – as, with his millions, he could well afford to be. 'I'd back Harry

Lamb at two to one; but I hate the hubbub and the vulgar uproar of a prize-fight, and the kind of rabble that follows such a fight revolts all my five senses. What is more, the glory is gone from the sport: it is in the hands of the speculators and the common gamblers who, more often than not, have hired rowdies to break the ring if it suits them – if one or other of the contestants has not already been tampered with by the bookmakers.'

'Ah, the common herd!' said Mr Forrest, in agreement, looking, I doubt not, every inch the Coriolanus; what time his supple mind was working fast. 'But, Mr Pelleteer, why not have a private match in your private park, with fifty or sixty spectators as guests of your own inviting?'

'Sheer genius!' cried Mr Pelleteer. 'I'll pitch a ring in the cricket-field, and have a cold collation in the pavilion, by George! I'll put up a purse of a thousand, what?'

Then Mr Forrest lost no time in dispatching an agent to New Jersey to inquire into the morale of Harry Lamb the Woolly Tiger. He learned that Lamb was somewhat of a Deaf Burke-ish temperament but of a sullen, secretive disposition; that he liked to sleep when he was not carousing, and had a contempt for manual labour; and that he already had 'one eye on the road'. Having been somewhat too particular in his attentions to the pretty daughter of a puritanical Dutch farmer nearby, who also had four powerful sons and a quick hand with a fowling-piece, it seemed that Harry Lamb had a hankering for the Carolinas. 'Well then, Tiger,' said Mr Forrest's agent, 'put it like this: which would you rather – fight the Britisher straight with the chance of a thousand dollars *if* you win, and fifty or a hundred dollars in a whip-round on a long 'maybe' if you lose? Or would you rather lie down and go

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to sleep after fifteen or twenty rounds for a dead certain fifteen hundred in your pocket?' Said Harry Lamb, 'See here, mister –for fifteen hundred good dollars certain, you can tie me in a bag and thresh me with flails!'

In conclusion, Mr Forrest says to me:

'And your part in the affair, Twatchman, is to deliver the messages, see to the smooth transaction of the business and keep your mouth shut. Your reward: what you win on Deaf Burke, and my goodwill.'

'And Mr Pelleteer?' I ask, tremulously. 'He is, to a certain extent, a patron of the Drama—'

'—Why, what the Devil does the man mean?' shouts Mr Forrest, in a passion. '*He*, a patron of the Drama? My good fool, the Drama is a patron of Mr Purse-Proud Pelleteer! Besides, what is a pugilistic fight but a kind of crude dramatic display? Why, surely, there is vastly more dramatic continuity in a foregone conclusion skilfully arrived at, than in a haphazard punching-match? In any event, Pelleteer will never know; and it positively is a scientific fact that what you do not know cannot hurt you subjectively. Are we not all in a state of subjective objectivity, *Dee* your eyes?'

I asked Mr Forrest to give me a glass of brandy, for I was taken with a faint, falling sensation: everything being said and done now was dreamily familiar to me. It had all been said and done before; and when all was said and done, all would be to do again.

So it was with a reluctant heart that I returned to the hotel. And it was with a limp hand I took the document Mr Jack offered me. There was the challenge, formally written, and couched more like a polite invitation than anything else.

Junius Brutus Booth was there, deep in thought, wearing an expression of puzzlement and distaste, and clasping his head as if he intended at any moment to throw it away with a loud 'Pah!' like Hamlet's skull.

'Well, Slops?' asks Mr Jack.

'Well, sir,' I reply, 'a private challenge for a thousand-dollar stake—'

'—What like is this man Harry Lamb?'

'I've never seen him, sir, but as I have heard, he is about five foot nine and a hundred and seventy pounds or so; something of Mr Burke's stature and build, I believe. And he has a reputation for rough and reckless fighting.'

' "Auspices of Hamilton Pelleteer, Esquire," ' says Mr Jack. 'Who's he?'

Mr Booth says:

'Pelleteer? He is not quite as rich as John Jacob Astor. He thinks he knows something about racing; he thinks he knows something about boxing; but his greatest folly is that he thinks he knows something about acting! I do not expect you to believe me when I tell you that he *pays money* to see *Edwin Forrest* perform! "Oh," you will say, "to err is human – we all make mistakes – Mr Pelleteer, misled by the hired hacks who write the puffs in the cheaper newspapers, committed the error of going once, only once, to see that pitiful buffoon strike his attitudes – and he never went a second time." There, you would be wrong: Pelleteer engages boxes, several at a time, for entire seasons just to see Forrest in a frenzy! But, being a fool who thinks foam at the mouth is a sign of spirit in a horse, I daresay he values Forrest on account of the quantity of soap he chews when he makes a travesty of the demented King Lear . . .

'*Aha!*—' With this ejaculation, Mr Junius Brutus Booth leaps into the air. '—*Aha!* . . .

'*I* see the odious pink tail of the rat behind the arras! I smell the dastardly plot against me and mine! . . . Oh gentlemen, gentlemen, *I* know the debased cunning of a certain type of vulgar and stultified provincial theatrical mentality; I comprehend the levogyrations of that coven, dancing widdershins! . . . No, really, it's pitiful!'

'Have the goodness,' says Mr Jack, stern as a judge, 'to speak plainly and to the point.'

'Why, Mr Jack, my dear fellow, this whole affair is a piddling counterplot, borrowed from the lowest form of melodrama. Let me outline the trick in items—'

'—Whose trick?' asks Mr Jack.

'Edwin Forrest's trick, of course! For I see his clumsy hand, clearly, through it all – since the misguided Pelleteer is his friend. Firstly: in spite of a rumour that caused the *cognoscenti* – the gentry "in the know" – to wager large sums on the Erie Strong Boy, our heroic James Burke won; and Forrest knows that *I* am indebted to Burke, that *I* won money on Burke and will back him again whenever he fights, at no matter what odds! Secondly: Forrest, a low and mercenary fellow at heart, and imagining that everyone else is like him, tries to put himself in Mr Jack's position, now that Burke has won – and will be the favourite next match, with the betting heavy in his favour. Hence, as Forrest reasons, Mr Jack and his intimates will only pretend to back Burke, but surreptitiously will lay money *against* him, it being assumed that he can be prevailed upon to lose. So therefore, thirdly: Edwin Forrest will have tampered with this man Harry Lamb; he will have paid Lamb to lose at all costs – so that we, to whom he

attributes something of his own natural depravity, will be the losers by Burke's unexpectedly winning! But, sir, *but* – fourthly: Forrest, in his immeasurable conceit, does not see that we have wit enough to anticipate this move of his, which he fondly imagines to be so clever! I mean, he will not realize that we can play into his hands, with full foreknowledge of his game. . . . Run under his guns, sir! I speak, now, as a naval tactician . . . Burke must lose this fight!'

Mr Jack, with lowering sarcasm, says, 'What, Mr Booth? Are you suggesting that people like ourselves fight a "cross", sir?'

Mr Junius Brutus Booth replies, with heat, 'Sir! I have broken my cane upon a man's back for far less than you suggest, "Cross" – I dare you to mention that word in my presence! What, sir, do you call it playing "cross" if you sacrifice a pawn to gain a queen in a chess game? "Cross" forsooth! If this is such, why then, to feint were to cringe! If, withdrawing in a manœuvre for position, you appear to flee in order to get your enemy into a certain position, does this imply dishonourable submission? If a general throws away a company to win a battle – or a battle, by Jove, to win a campaign! – is he fighting a "cross"? This is a skirmish, sir, a nothing!'

'I should have to explain this very carefully to the Deaf 'Un,' says Mr Jack, 'and there is a matter of a thousand dollars to be won that will interest him, I daresay.'

'I will put down that sum, sir, in advance,' cries Mr Booth, 'in advance!—' then he eyes me moodily '—I know I can rely upon Mr Twatchman's discretion in this matter . . . upon Mr Twatchman's utter and absolute discretion?'

'Sir!' I cry in genuine agony. 'All this is too deep for me; it is too complicated for my understanding, sir; it is too subtle for my comprehension and too fine for my nerves. I have nothing to say in the matter, or about the matter, and I will not be consulted concerning the matter: I am only an agent, a man of business, sir, with his living to get! Whatever I hear, as such, I lock in my breast.'

'All right,' says Mr Jack; then, to Mr Booth, 'I see your point, and understand your attitude – I am to persuade the Deaf 'Un to be your auxiliary in a strategic withdrawal, in your gentlemanly little battle against the designing Edwin Forrest?' I should have thought that an innocent child could have detected the corrosive irony of his tone, but Booth nods, eagerly.

'You put it succinctly, Mr Jack – in a nutshell! We must lose *by surprise*, do you see?'

'It's so bad for my man's prestige, though,' says Mr Jack, thoughtfully. 'It would be worth a small fortune to Harry Lamb, to be able to say he licked the British Champion.'

'I will put down *two* thousand dollars,' declares Mr Booth.

'Very good,' says Mr Jack, and then he begins to laugh. 'I thought I had seen everything,' he says. 'I have seen a good battle broken up by a swarm of bees, and I have seen a timekeeper struck by lightning; I have seen a weak man made strong by pain, and winning; and I have seen a strong man, who sold a fight, having the dickens of a time losing it. But two well-matched bruisers both determined to lose, I have never seen before – for this alone it was worth travelling three thousand miles!'

'This is not a laughing matter, Mr Jack,' says Mr Booth.

Mr Jack replies, 'No, damme! It is Strategy reduced to

its ultimate refinement, and the Art of Tactics brought to its logical conclusion. Why, it's positively statesmanlike!'

After Mr Booth had left, I sat for a while in a state of mind bordering on mild and harmless imbecility. Then Burke appears, and Mr Jack tells him of Harry Lamb's challenge and Mr Booth's proposition. Burke says carelessly:

'Vell, I knows vot. The Fancy'll vant a fight, so this 'ere Lamb durstn't drop afore the fifteenth, durse 'e? Eh?'

'At the very soonest,' says Mr Jack. 'Lamb *must* make a show, for his own reputation's sake; and anyone that calls himself a fighter can't possibly be beaten in under fifteen rounds. . . . It's a ticklish business, though – we know nothing of our man, and I hear he's a tough customer.'

'Vy then, guv, the tougher the better. That way 'e 'as got confidence to go on till 'e thinks 'e sees me a-veakenin', like. So it'll be 'ammer an' tongs, d'yer see, till I puts my pore knee out on joint in the eleventh. The werdict is avarded to this 'ere Lamb, an' I am the wictim on a haccident. . . . Lookee 'ere—'

And, with a sudden convulsive movement of his hip, Burke appears to dislocate his right knee, sir; it goes with a thick but audible *snap*, and the bulge is plain to see through the leg of his trousers. Grinning, he makes another such movement; and the joint snaps back into place.

'—I learnt it orf a tumbler at Bartholomew Fair ven I vas a kid; it don't 'urt vun bit, bad as it looks. Many's the shillin' I've earned orf a soft-'earted passenger vith that 'ere. Eh?'

'All right. But let us have no more of your philosophy this time, Deaf 'Un, if you value the coat on your back;

for so help me, if you win you positively and definitely lose. Is that plain?'

'As mud, guv.'

'And if Miss Flax-and-Wax comes any of the simpers and sighs about "My Hero", and what not, always remember that a beaten pug with the price of a champagne supper in his pocket is worth twenty cleaned-out conquerors. Eh, Slops?'

I reply, 'All I know, sir, is that I am money out of pocket, and I have my living to get; and my mind is so disordered right now that if I were asked to invest in the likelihood of the sun's rising in the East tomorrow morning, I should hesitate!'

'Vy – *do* it?' asks Burke.

And I have to think twice before I reply, 'Yes.'

Well, the challenge being accepted, the match between Burke and Lamb was arranged to take place ten days from that date, in the privacy of Pelleteer Park, before an exclusive audience of sporting gentlemen to the number of eighty or ninety, mostly from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Connecticut.

And for the sake of the Countess, Burke was quite a model of seemly deportment for the nonce. He gave Mr Jack half his money – always in the firm belief that he would never see it again – and settled his accounts with me. He expressed a desire to 'come the John Gulley' – alluding to the pugilist of that name who became a Member of Parliament – and even got himself a blue coat and drab trousers, saying:

'Cor stone me cracked, if that 'ere Gulley could do it, vy shouldn't *I* 'ave a go at the Vhigs-an'-Tories?'

The ladies were gracious to him. The Countess let her-

self be coaxed into permitting him to buy her a watch, and the Baroness unbent so far as to confide to him the fact that she owed two hundred and thirty-one dollars for 'rent and sundries' and, what is more, she allowed him, in the strictest confidence, to lend her this sum exactly – but not a penny over!

And he was happy, sir, happy. Volumes of practical fact and millions of money could have made him no happier, as Mr Jack says to me, adding with a shrug:

'. . . Let him be, while it lasts. I'll have the blood of any son of a dog that disenchants him!'

'That individual shall not be I, sir,' I vow.

And it was not I.

The day before Mr Jack was to take Deaf Burke out to New Jersey, Mr Randolph Wotanoke invited us all to join him and Miss Robina Darcy-Darcy at a light luncheon at Jammet's. Mr Jack excused himself, pleading pressure of business; but it was pressure of disapproval in this case, I think, for he had warmed up within himself such a simmering distaste for the two titled ladies that he was hard put to it to be ordinarily civil in their presence.

So the Countess and the Baroness, Miss Robina and Mr Wotanoke, and Burke and I enjoyed a bit of fish and a cup of cold *consommé*, a sole, a capon, etcetera, together with an appropriate but temperate sufficiency of some very sound wine; and, after we had drunk a toast or two in iced champagne, our party broke up at about half past two in the afternoon. Then, bidding Burke *au revoir* until the day after next, Mr Wotanoke conducted Miss Robina to the Parisian Gallery, where she only wanted to 'look' at some new printed silks; and Burke and I walked sedately with the Baroness and her niece to their place of

residence, Mrs Mayhew's Select Private Hotel For Ladies Only.

We said good-day to them in the doorway and strolled leisurely towards home; but we had not gone a hundred yards, when Burke stopped and, slapping his forehead, exclaimed:

'Vell! Vot a Juggins I am, for sure!'

'Have you forgotten something?' I ask.

'On course not; I just *remembered* something!—' and he fishes out of his tail-pocket a little morocco box '—I got this 'ere for '*er*! . . . Purty? It's got writin' inside.'

It is a nice little gold bracelet, set with small diamonds, and on the inner surface is engraved:

V. P. With All My Heart. J. B.

I tell him, with a sigh, 'I wish you would consult me before buying any such trinkets, Mr Burke . . . I can get them for you at a lower price.'

'Oh, I vouldn't buy nothink at 'alf-price for that 'ere Angel – I vish it 'ad cost a thousand!' says Burke. 'But I clean forgot to gi' it 'er. Them eyes on 'er – blyme me, vot orbs! – drove it out o' my 'ead. So, ve'll jist go back.'

Back we went, then, to Mrs Mayhew's which – as I have said before – was a most respectable establishment where turkeys were carved into 'bosoms and appendages other than wings', and the 'limbs' of the piano were discreetly dressed in pantalettes. No 'Person of the Opposite Sex'– meaning Man – had ever been allowed to set foot there.

But Mrs Mayhew was out, and a chambermaid was deputy dragon at the door. It being Burke's whim to 'gi' the gals a s'prise', he so cozened this bewildered maiden with compliments and so demoralized her with silver that she stammered:

'The Baroness and the young lady live on the second-floor front, the best parlour and sleeping-chamber—' they had no bedrooms at Mayhew's '—but if Mrs Mayhew catches you, I'll swear I was overpowered by force; so I will!'

So Burke tip-toes upstairs; and I follow, feeling rather like the Second Murderer in *Macbeth*. On the landing we stop, and look about us; and listen . . .

'Somebody's a-blowin' somebody up,' says Burke, with a grin, 'an' I'll be a blymed if'n it don't sound like the Countess!' Indeed, we can hear the sound of a lady's voice raised in most vigorous protest, saying:

'You false creature! You Benedict Arnold in human guise! You snake in the grass!'

'Blowed if it *ain't* the Countess!' mutters Burke. 'Vell, 'ere's a rum go! Somebody's a-been upsettin' of 'er.'

The Baroness's voice says, 'Honey, honey, be calm!—' and in neither of the voices, now, is there trace of any foreign accent, Polish or otherwise '—What have I done wrong?'

There is no mistaking the silvery little voice of the Countess, straining as though to shriek if only it had the power:

'Everything, you monster!'

There is the sound of a slap, and a gasp; and then, the Baroness:

'I'm sorry, darling! I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'Strike me blind,' says Burke, 'but the old 'ooman's a-vollopin' on my sveet'eart! . . . I ain't a-goin' to stand none o' that 'ere!' With this, he steps forward, I, close at his heels, vainly attempting to restrain him.

The parlour door is slightly ajar: I suppose that, in her

passion, the Countess slammed it so hard that it sprang open again. And from where we are standing, we command an unobstructed view of the chamber, furnished as such parlours generally are: with a green horsehair sofa, half a dozen chairs, a couple of easy-chairs and footstools, a round table, a secretaire, an overmantel mirror with half a dozen shelves of loose ornaments, a what-not, four or five framed prints illustrating the Book of Exodus, etcetera, etcetera. The dog Félice is yapping excitedly on the rug.

But what causes us to stop, astonished, is not the spectacle of the Baroness beating her niece. No, sir. The Countess is thrashing her aunt!

Belabouring her about the head and face, sir, with a sharp hand; and clutching her throat with the other, sobbing:

'You heartless, ungrateful creature! You unnatural wretch! Is this my reward for all I have done for you – that you must ogle and touch and kiss, yes, *kiss* under my very eyes, that ribboned cat?'

Stupefied, I ask myself, 'Cat? What cat? Félice wears a ribbon, but is a dog.'

But then, striking with all her strength at every repetition of the name, the Countess sobs:

'Take *that* for your beautiful Robina . . . and *that* for your Darcy – Darcy – *Darcy* – DARCY – *DARCY*!'

Then she grasps her aunt by the hair and tears it off.

The Baroness is a man!

Yes sir, somewhat too sallow and bony to be personable, and rather too delicately-boned to be healthy, but a man indubitably. He sees us, and says:

'Carrie – look!'

The Countess turns, and there we are, as curious a group as ever was assembled in a parlour: Burke, frozen, holding a jeweller's box, flanked by myself on left, flabbergasted; the Countess centre, agape, holding aloft a ringleted wig; and, against the mantelpiece, a man in a hooped skirt, terrified. There is a throbbing stillness, such as must fall when a man is stricken suddenly deaf.

The little dog – which had taken to Burke from the first – comes to him, wagging its tail; and I look at him. All the blood has run away from his face, and he is shaking his head, trying to understand.

It is he who breaks what seems to be an everlasting silence, saying, 'Vell. So *that's* vot you are!' – pointing first at the girl, and then to her companion.

He advances and half-reaches out to take hold of the man, but his hand stops in mid-air: the female dress renders it powerless, and it falls back to his side. The girl, finding her voice, says:

'Don't hurt him! He is my husband—'

My heart is going like an unsprung cart on a corduroy road.

'—Your *vot*?'

'My husband – don't hurt him,' says she. '*I* am to blame!' And that pitiable object in the hooped skirt blabbers:

'Yes, it was all Carrie's idea, from the first!'

'An' vot might your name be, youse?'

'Arthur Stokes.'

'Stokes? An' 'ern?' – Burke jerks a thumb in the direction of the girl.

'Caroline,' she says, and hangs her head.

'You ain't a Countess at all, then?'

'I am a governess – I want to be an actress.

'It vos all a sell, then? I vos done, eh?' he says, not as a question but as one who goes over the facts in a case. 'It was all a lark, vas it?' She nods. 'You vos a-laughin' at me all the time, then? Eh?' She hesitates, then shakes her head.

'At first, yes,' she says, 'later, no.' At this, Burke draws a tremendous breath, and I see him making the effort to rally.

Blood comes back into his cheeks, and now I think I know something of the spirit that must lurk somewhere in this singular, half-wild creature: the blind will that made him rally at the ninety-ninth round when he beat Simon Byrne.

He actually laughs! 'Vy, to think on me a-'andin' that 'ere Stokes into a carriage, an' callin' '*im* "Me Lydy"!—' he laughs louder '—an' me a-thinkin' you vos a hangel! I'd a-murdered of anybody as spoke ill agen you! Vot a lark it all is!—' and he laughs so heartily that the tears trickle down his face '—Nobody ever said as I couldn't take a joke,' he sobs.

'Don't!' she says. 'Don't!'

'But tell us, vot vos it all *for*?'

'To oblige Mr Edwin Forrest,' she says. 'It was to have been nothing but a practical joke, at first. He said he would give me an opportunity to play Juliet – my husband is an actor too. . . . Then one thing led to another . . .'

'Sich as lockets, an' bracelets, an' all that 'ere,' says Burke, nodding sympathetically. ' 'Ere – I got this 'ere li'l bracelet for yer. There's writin' on the inside, but you can 'ave it took orf. I give Solomons a 'underd an' fifty dollars for it; 'e'll buy it back, I dessay. Ketch!—'and he throws her the jeweller's box, which falls and comes open, and

the bracelet rolls away, the dog running after it, yelping '—An' that 'ere li'l dawg, this Varsaw Poodle, vere'd you git 'im? Orf on a street corner?' She nods. 'Now that 'ere *vos* mean,' says Burke.

Then he taps the cringing Stokes on the shoulder. 'Youse! Pick up that 'ere vig.' Stokes picks up the Baroness wig. 'Put it back on,' Burke tells him.

'What are you going to do?' the girl asks, as her husband obeys.

'Nothink,' says Burke, 'because I tell you vot—' he gropes for words, and finds a few '—that 'ere Mr Jack . . . 'E's my only pral in the world; ain't 'e, Tvatchman?'

'He is truly concerned for your welfare,' I say, startled at being so suddenly addressed. 'Mr Jack is very fond of you.'

'That's it! Now Mr Jack knew all along as I vas bein' made a fool on, but 'e did not vant for me to know it, for fear I might get 'urt in my feelin's. Vereas, I ain't got no feelin's, d'yer see?' says Deaf Burke. 'I'm a donkey; me, I don't feel aught but a beatin' an' I von't learn by that, either. But Mr Jack is a gen'lman, an' 'e feels for me like for a li'l child. Got it? You can't 'urt me 'cause I'm too thick, but you *can* 'urt my pral Mr Jack if you let 'im *think* as I got 'urt. So youse two are a-goin' to let things go on as if I'd never twigged this 'ere li'l joke o' yourn, an' 'e must leave this 'ere town vith a easy mind, a-feelin' as 'e's done me good. For I can't 'ave Mr Jack 'urt, an' I von't 'ave Mr Jack 'urt. I can't promise you no Romeos an' Juliets,' says he, 'an' I think that 'ere Forrest vas a-gammonin' of you all along; but I *can* promise you vot I've got to give, an' that's this—' he shows Stokes his great black fist '—if'n you don't do vot I say.'

'What do you want us to do?' asks Stokes, green with fright.

'Put that 'ere vig back on. Ve'll go on jist like ve 'ave been a-goin' on, till the last minute. An' I'll bow to you in public an' call you "Me Lydy" . . . an' *she* vill call me 'er 'ero. An' so nobody vill be vun penny the viser except us 'ere – an' votever others as 'ave made a laughin'-stock on me. For if'n I don't know vot a fool I am, the joke goes flat, an' Mr Jack ain't 'urt.'

'Oh, what have I done, what have I done?' cries the girl in real grief, tearing her handkerchief.

'Nothink,' says Burke, 'but to take a good deed avay from a gen'lman like Mr Jack vould be meaner nor takin' a crutch avay from a cripple—' he picks up the little dog Félice '—Can I 'ave this 'ere?'

'Yes.'

'Thank'ee kindly. Goo' day to ye.'

We went; and as I closed the door, I saw the unhappy girl throw herself, weeping, onto the sofa, at which, sir, surprised by a combination of emotions which I have never been able to analyse. I felt an almost overpowering desire to weep, too. On the way back to Burke's hotel I suffered what I can only describe as a stab, or twinge, of compassion for him, which took me unawares and shocked me – shocked me, I say, into understanding for the first time what is meant by the words, 'Pity is akin to love.'

I trembled on the verge of apologizing to Deaf Burke for the sins of all the clever people in the world, and begging forgiveness for myself, too! 'Can it be thus,' I wondered, 'that heathens pray to stocks and stones?' Awe and humility filled my heart.

'I am sorry . . .' I start to say; but can say no more.

'Vy, 'ow down-in-the-mouth you do look!' he says. 'Come, ol' feller, I'll stand a sup o' brandy to put some 'eart into yer. Never say die!'

I ask myself, 'What is he to you, and what have you to do with the broken daydreams of this bloody clown?' And a voice answers, 'You are the Dreamer and the Dream.'

'Vy,' Burke continues, 'you look almost as if you vas a bit sveet on the gal yerself!—' Absurd as this may be, I feel myself blushing red as fire, and can only laugh in reply. And I am angry with myself for so doing. '—If so,' says Burke, 'I'm sorry for yer, ol' chap, 'cause you refined 'uns takes it 'ard. Now me – vell, as the sayin' goes, you can't sveeten a bear's breath by a-givin' 'im of a clove to chew. Cheer up! Ve'll soon be dead!'

'If it makes him any happier to believe that I am in love with Caroline –or whatever her name really is – let him think so,' I say to myself. And yet I wish he had not taken this idea into his mind; or that, if he had, he had not given it expression.

'Come on, now,' says he as to a child, leading me into a saloon. 'Drink 'earty, an' see if I don't make you a lot o' nice money, ven I meets that 'ere Lamb. There, now!'

'Mr Jack will be waiting,' I say, but I take a glass of brandy with him nevertheless.

'I might 'a guessed as she vasn't a real lydy,' says he, thoughtfully.

'How so, Deaf 'Un?' I ask, calling him familiarly by his sobriquet for the first time.

'She vas too lydylike.'

And with this he starts to hum the vulgar, mock-pathetic ballad of 'Maggy The Cagmag Crier, The Cats-Meat Woman Of The Isle of Dogs.'

Back at the hotel, irritably waiting for us, Mr Jack asks impatiently:

'Well, well, and how's the Waxworks?'

'Meanin' the Countess? Vy, then, she's pretty so-so, guv,' says Burke, blandly.

'And what in the name of all that's hairy are you doing with that bird-eating spider under your arm?'

'Vot, li'l Fleas – this 'ere waluable Varsaw Poodle? The Countess gi' it me, 'cause this 'ere dumb creetur 'as took a fancy to me.'

'It probably knows how much you paid for it. . . . Go and take those tight boots off and unbutton that absurd collar, man! If you stumble, you'll cut your ears off.'

'Right you are, guv,' says Deaf Burke, cheerfully, 'but let's 'ave a sup o' brandy first. Then, ve'll polish orf that 'ere business vith this 'ere Lamb; I got a 'orrible idea as 'e's a-goin' to vhop me . . . I say, guv, 'ow much longer is ve a-goin' to stop in 'Merica?'

'Six or eight weeks more. Why?'

'I dunno . . . I'm kind o' 'omesick, all on a sudden,' says Burke, swallowing his brandy and going into the bedroom, whereupon Mr Jack, raising his eyes to a plaster cherub on the moulded ceiling, says to me:

'He'll be all right yet – praise the Providence that looks after babies and fools!'

But I wonder who looks after whom, when all is said and done; for the ways of Providence are very marvellous, sir. . . .

. . . Penitence Twatchman sighed, and William Makepeace Thackeray said, 'Upon my heart, I cannot quite put

my finger on what it is, but there is something deucedly pathetic in that story! But the end, man, the end! We poor devils of scribblers cannot get along without a Conclusion.'

'Why then, sir,' said Twatchman, 'Burke met Lamb and lost the match, dislocating his knee in the ninth round, and everyone was satisfied – except Mr Edwin Forrest who *had* behaved in somewhat less than a gentlemanly way, you will agree. Burke's subsequent career in America is not worth the narration: he won a fight, he lost a fight; and Mr Jack brought him home. Then, Mr Jack simply disappeared; dollar for dollar, sir, he had taken away one half of all Burke earned in America—'

'—Then he *was* a damned scoundrel, after all?' Thackeray interjected.

'Not so, sir. This money, amounting to something over two thousand pounds, he arranged to be paid to Deaf Burke at the rate of five pounds per week, so that, although it was in the nature of the poor boy to squander his money as soon as he got it, he was never in want. You see, Mr Jack knew what none of us ever dreamed of: Deaf Burke was consumptive. He fought his last fight in a fever, in 1843, against Bob Castles and won in seventy minutes. A heroic climax, Mr Thackeray! . . . And he died in 1845, sir, in his thirty-fifth year – stage-struck to the end. His little dog did not long survive him, I am told.'

'And the Countess? What of that one?'

'Oh, let us not speak contemptuously of our fellow creatures, Mr Thackeray, sir – do not speak of her as "that one". We all feel more than we know . . . I met Mrs Stokes in Boston, only a couple of years back; she was quite wealthy, sir, having established a popular but exclu-

sive dressmaking business. Her husband had died seven years previous, and she had not married again . . .'

Penitence Twatchman paused, and added slowly, 'She had no desire to change her condition, sir; in fact, she said that no consideration would induce her to do so, no consideration that I – or anyone else! – could offer . . . but she asked after Deaf Burke, sir—'

'—Whereupon you told her he was dead?' said Thackeray.

'I did, sir.'

'At which, no doubt, she sighed – or something?'

'No sir, she did not sigh, sir,' said Penitence Twatchman almost sharply. 'She simply said, "I have thought often of Mr Burke. He was a good man. I believe he is the only person I have ever truly loved." '

'And without a tear?' asked Thackeray.

'Dry-eyed, sir,' said Penitence Twatchman.

'Oh, poor girl, poor girl!'

'Yes sir,' said Penitence Twatchman.

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