

Roald Dahl
The Collected Short Stories of Roald Dahl
Volume II
Complete and Unabridged

This further collection of Roald Dahl's adult short stories, from his world-famous books, again includes many seen in the television series, TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED. Through the stories runs a vein of macabre malevolence, springing from slight, almost inconsequential everyday things. These bizarre plots--spiced with vibrant characters and subtle twists and turns--are utterly addictive.

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SOMEONE LIKE YOU

Taste

THERE were six of us to dinner that night at Mike Schofield's house in London: Mike and his wife and daughter, and my wife and I, and a man called Richard Pratt.

Richard Pratt was a famous gourmet. He was president of a small society known as the Epicures, and each month he circulated privately to its members a pamphlet on food and wines. He organized dinners where sumptuous dishes and rare wines were served. He refused to smoke for fear of harming his palate, and when discussing a wine, he had a curious, rather droll habit of referring to it as though it were a living being. 'A prudent wine,' he would

d say, 'rather diffident and evasive, but quite prudent.' Or, 'A good-humoured wine, benevolent and cheerful slightly obscene, perhaps, but none the less good-humoured.'

I had been to dinner at Mike's twice before when Richard Pratt was there, and on each occasion Mike and his wife had gone out of their way to produce a special meal for the famous gourmet. And this one, clearly, was to be no exception. The moment we entered the dining-room, I could see that the table was laid for a feast. The tall candles, the yellow roses, the quantity of shining silver, the three wineglasses to each person, and above all, the faint scent of roasting meat from the kitchen brought the first warm ooings of saliva to my mouth.

As we sat down, I remembered that on both Richard Pratt's previous visits Mike had played a little betting game with him over the claret, challenging him to name its breed and its vintage. Pratt had replied that that should not be too difficult provided it was one of the great years. Mike had then bet him a case of the wine in question that he could not do it. Pratt had accepted, and had won both times. Tonight I felt sure that the little game would be played over again, for Mike was quite willing to lose the bet in order to prove that his wine was good enough to be recognized, and Pratt, for his part, seemed to take a grave, restrained pleasure in displaying his knowledge.

The meal began with a plate of whitebait, fried very crisp in butter, and to go with it there was a Moselle. Mike got up and poured the wine himself, and when he sat down again, I could see that he was watching Richard Pratt. He had set the bottle in front of me so that I could read the label. It said, 'Geierslay Ohligsberg, 1945'. He leaned over and whispered to me that Geierslay was a tiny village in the Moselle, almost unknown outside Germany. He said that this wine we were drinking was something unusual, that the output of the vineyard was so small that it was almost impossible for a stranger to get any of it. He had visited Geierslay personally the previous summer in order to obtain the few bottles that they had finally allowed him to have.

"I doubt whether anyone else in the country has any of it at the moment," he said. I saw him glance again at Richard Pratt. "Great thing about Moselle," he continued, raising his voice, "it's the perfect wine to serve before a claret. A lot of people serve a Rhine wine instead, but that's because they don't know any better. A Rhine wine will kill a delicate claret, you know that? It's barbaric to serve a Rhine before a claret. But a Moselle--ah!--a Moselle is exactly right."

Mike Schofield was an amiable, middle-aged man, but he was a stockbroker. To be precise, he was a jobber in the stock market, and like a number of his kind, he seemed to be somewhat embarrassed, almost ashamed to find that he had made so much money with so slight a talent. In his heart he knew that he was not really much more than a bookmaker--an unctuous, infinitely r

respectable, secretly unscrupulous bookmaker--and he knew that his friends knew it, too. So he was seeking now to become a man of culture, to cultivate a literary and aesthetic taste, to collect paintings, music, books, and all the rest of it. His little sermon about Rhine wine and Moselle was a part of this thing, this culture that he sought.

"A charming little wine, don't you think?" he said. He was still watching Richard Pratt. I could see him give a rapid furtive glance down the table each time he dropped his head to take a mouthful of whitebait. I could almost feel him waiting for the moment when Pratt would take his first sip, and I look up from his glass with a smile of pleasure, of astonishment, perhaps even of wonder, and then there would be a discussion and Mike would tell him about the village of Geierslay.

But Richard Pratt did not taste his wine. He was completely engrossed in conversation with Mike's eighteen-year-old daughter, Louise. He was half turned towards her, smiling at her, telling her, so far as I could gather, some story about a chef in a Paris restaurant. As he spoke, he leaned closer and closer to her, seeming in his eagerness almost to impinge upon her, and the poor girl leaned as far as she could away from him nodding politely, rather desperately, and looking not at his face but at the topmost button of his dinner jacket.

We finished our fish, and the maid came round removing the plates. When she came to Pratt, she saw that he had not yet touched his food, so she hesitated, and Pratt noticed her. He waved her away, broke off his conversation, and quickly began to eat, popping the little crisp brown fish quickly into his mouth with rapid jabbing movements of his fork. Then, when he had finished, he reached for his glass, and in two short swallows he tipped the wine down his throat and turned immediately to resume his conversation with Louise Schofield.

Mike saw it all. I was conscious of him sitting there, very still, containing himself, looking at his guest. His round jovial face seemed to loosen slightly and to sag, but he contained himself and was still and said nothing.

Soon the maid came forward with the second course. This was a large roast beef. She placed it on the table in front of Mike who stood up and carved it, cutting the slices very thin, laying them gently on the plates for the maid to take around. When he had served everyone, including himself, he put down the carving knife and leaned forward with both hands on the edge of the table.

"Now," he said, speaking to all of us but looking at Richard Pratt. "Now for the claret. I must go and fetch the claret, if you'll excuse me."

"You go and fetch it, Mike?" I said. "Where is it?"

"In my study, with the cork out--breathing."

"Why the study?"

"Acquiring room temperature, of course. It's been there twenty-four hours

"But why the study?"

"It's the best place in the house. Richard helped me choose it last time he was here."

At the sound of his name, Pratt looked round.

"That's right, isn't it?" Mike said.

"Yes," Pratt answered, nodding gravely. "That's right."

"On top of the green filing cabinet in my study," Mike said. "That's the place we chose. A good draught-free spot in a room with an even temperature. Excuse me now, will you, while I fetch it."

The thought of another wine to play with had restored his humour, and he hurried out of the door, to return a minute later more slowly, walking softly, holding in both hands a wine basket in which a dark bottle lay. The label was out of sight, facing downwards. "Now!" he cried as he came towards the table. "What about this one, Richard? You'll never name this one!"

Richard Pratt turned slowly and looked up at Mike, then his eyes travelled down to the bottle nestling in its small wicker basket, and he raised his eyebrows; a slight supercilious arching of the brows, and with it a pushing outward of the wet lower lip, suddenly imperious and ugly.

"You'll never get it," Mike said. "Not in a hundred years."

"A claret?" Richard Pratt asked, condescending.

"Of course."

"I assume, then, that it's from one of the smaller vineyards?"

"Maybe it is, Richard. And then again, maybe it isn't."

"But it's a good year? One of the great years?"

"Yes, I guarantee that."

"Then it shouldn't be too difficult," Richard Pratt said, drawling his words, looking exceedingly bored. Except that, to me, there was something strange about his drawling and his boredom: between the eyes a shadow of something evil, and in his bearing an intentness that gave me a faint sense of uneasiness as I watched him.

"This one is really rather difficult," Mike said. "I won't force you to bet on this one."

"Indeed. And why not?" Again the slow arching of the brows, the cool, intent look.

"Because it's difficult."

"That's not very complimentary to me, you know."

"My dear man," Mike said, "I'll bet you with pleasure, if that's what you wish."

"It shouldn't be too hard to name it."

"You mean you want to bet?"

"I'm perfectly willing to bet," Richard Pratt said.

"All right, then, we'll have the usual. A case of the wine itself."

"You don't think I'll be able to name it, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, and with all due respect, I don't," Mike said. He was making some effort to remain polite, but Pratt was not bothering overmuch to conceal his contempt for the whole proceeding. And yet, curiously, his next question seemed to betray a certain interest.

"You like to increase the bet?"

"No, Richard. A case is plenty."

"Would you like to bet fifty cases?"

"That would be silly."

Mike stood very still behind his chair at the head of the table, carefully holding the bottle in its ridiculous wicker basket. There was a trace of whiteness around his nostrils now, and his mouth was shut very tight.

Pratt was lolling back in his chair, looking up at him, the eyebrows raised, the eyes half closed, a little smile touching the corners of his lips. And again I saw, or thought I saw, something distinctly disturbing about the man's face, that shadow of intentness between the eyes, and in the eyes themselves, right in their centres where it was black, a small slow spark of shrewdness, hiding.

"So you don't want to increase the bet?"

"As far as I'm concerned, old man, I don't give a damn," Mike said. "I'll bet you anything you like."

The three women and I sat quietly, watching the two men. Mike's wife was becoming annoyed; her mouth had gone sour and I felt that at any moment she was going to interrupt. Our roast beef lay before us on our plates, slowly steaming.

"So you'll bet me anything I like?"

"That's what I told you. I'll bet you anything you damn well please, if you want to make an issue out of it."

"Even ten thousand pounds?"

"Certainly I will, if that's the way you want it." Mike was more confident now. He knew quite well that he could call any sum Pratt cared to mention.

"So you say I can name the bet?" Pratt asked again.

"That's what I said."

There was a pause while Pratt looked slowly around the table, first at me, then at the three women, each in turn. He appeared to be reminding us that we were witness to the offer.

"Mike!" Mrs Schofield said. "Mike, why don't we stop this nonsense and eat our food. It's getting cold."

"But it isn't nonsense," Pratt told her evenly. "We're making a little bet."

I noticed the maid standing in the background holding a dish of vegetables, wondering whether to come forward with them or not.

"All right then," Pratt said. "I'll tell you what I want you to bet."

"Come on, then," Mike said, rather reckless. "I don't give a damn what it is--you're on."

Pratt nodded, and again the little smile moved the corners of his lips, and then, quite slowly, looking at Mike all the time, he said, "I want you to bet me the hand of your daughter in marriage."

Louise Schofield gave a jump. "Hey!" she cried. "No! That's not funny! Look here, Daddy, that's not funny at all."

"No, dear," her mother said. "They're only joking."

"I'm not joking," Richard Pratt said.

"It's ridiculous," Mike said. He was off balance again now.

"You said you'd bet anything I liked."

"I meant money."

"You didn't say money."

"That's what I meant."

"Then it's a pity you didn't say it. But anyway, if you wish to go back on your offer, that's quite all right with me."

"It's not a question of going back on my offer, old man. It's a no-bet anyway, because you can't match the stake. You yourself don't happen to have a daughter to put up against mine in case you lose. And if you had, I wouldn't want to marry her."

"I'm glad of that, dear," his wife said.

"I'll put up anything you like," Pratt announced. "My house, for example. How about my house?"

"Which one?" Mike asked, joking now.

"The country one."

"Why not the other one as well?"

"All right then, if you wish it. Both my houses."

At that point I saw Mike pause. He took a step forward and placed the bottle in its basket gently down on the table. He moved the saltcellar to one side, then the pepper, and then he picked up his knife, studied the blade thoughtfully for a moment, and put it down again. His daughter, too, had seen him pause.

"Now, Daddy!" she cried. "Don't be absurd! It's too silly for words. I refuse to be betted on like this."

"Quite right, dear," her mother said. "Stop it at once, Mike, and sit down and eat your food."

Mike ignored her. He looked over at his daughter and he smiled, a slow, fatherly, protective smile. But in his eyes, suddenly, there glimmered a little triumph. "You know," he said, smiling as he spoke. "You know, Louise, we

ought to think about this a bit."

"Now, stop it, Daddy! I refuse even to listen to you! Why, I've never heard anything so ridiculous in my life!"

"No, seriously, my dear. Just wait a moment and hear what I have to say."

"But I don't want to hear it."

"Louise! Please! It's like this. Richard, here, has offered us a serious bet. He is the one who wants to make it, not me. And if he loses, he will have to hand over a considerable amount of property. Now, wait a minute, my dear, don't interrupt. The point is this. He cannot possibly win."

"He seems to think he can."

"Now listen to me, because I know what I'm talking about. The expert, when tasting a claret--so long as it is not one of the famous great wines like Lafite or Latour--can only get a certain way towards naming the vineyard. He can, of course, tell you the Bordeaux district from which the wine comes, whether it is from St Emilion, Pomerol, Graves, or MŽdoc. But then each district has several communes, little counties, and each county has many, many small vineyards. It is impossible for a man to differentiate between them all by taste and smell alone. I don't mind telling you that this one I've got here is a wine from a small vineyard that is surrounded by many other small vineyards, and he'll never get it. It's impossible."

"You can't be sure of that," his daughter said.

"I'm telling you I can. Though I say it myself, I understand quite a bit about this wine business, you know. And anyway, heavens alive, girl, I'm your father and you don't think I'd let you in for--for something you didn't want, do you? I'm trying to make you some money."

"Mike!" his wife said sharply. "Stop it now, Mike, please!"

Again he ignored her. "If you will take this bet," he said to his daughter, "in ten minutes you will be the owner of two large houses."

"But I don't want two large houses, Daddy."

"Then sell them. Sell them back to him on the spot. I'll arrange all that for you. And then, just think of it, my dear, you'll be rich! You'll be independent for the rest of your life!"

"Oh, Daddy, I don't like it. I think it's silly."

"So do I," the mother said. She jerked her head briskly up and down as she spoke, like a hen. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Michael, even suggesting such a thing! Your own daughter, too!"

Mike didn't even look at her. "Take it!" he said eagerly, staring hard at the girl. "Take it, quick! I'll guarantee you won't lose."

"But I don't like it, Daddy."

"Come on, girl. Take it!"

Mike was pushing her hard. He was leaning towards her, fixing her with t

wo hard bright eyes, and it was not easy for the daughter to resist him.

"But what if I lose?"

"I keep telling you, you can't lose. I'll guarantee it."

"Oh, Daddy must I?"

"I'm making you a fortune. So come on now. What do you say, Louise? All right?"

For the last time, she hesitated. Then she gave a helpless little shrug of the shoulders and said, "Oh, all right, then. Just so long as you swear there's no danger of losing."

"Good!" Mike cried. "That's fine! Then it's a bet!"

"Yes," Richard Pratt said, looking at the girl. "It's a bet."

Immediately, Mike picked up the wine, tipped the first thimbleful into his own glass, then skipped excitedly around the table filling up the others.

Now everyone was watching Richard Pratt, watching his face as he reached slowly for his glass with his right hand and lifted it to his nose. The man was about fifty years old and he did not have a pleasant face. Somehow, it was all mouth--mouth and lips--the full, wet lips of the professional gourmet, the lower lip hanging downward in the centre, a pendulous, permanently open taster's lip, shaped open to receive the rim of a glass or a morsel of food.

Like a keyhole, I thought, watching it; his mouth is like a large wet keyhole.

Slowly he lifted the glass to his nose. The point of the nose entered the glass and moved over the surface of the wine, delicately sniffing. He swirled the wine gently around in the glass to receive the bouquet. His concentration was intense. He had closed his eyes, and now the whole top half of his body, the head and neck and chest, seemed to become a kind of huge sensitive smelling-machine, receiving, filtering, analysing the message from the sniffing nose.

Mike, I noticed, was lounging in his chair, apparently unconcerned, but he was watching every move. Mrs Schofield, the wife, sat prim and upright at the other end of the table, looking straight ahead, her face tight with disapproval. The daughter, Louise, had shifted her chair away a little, and sideways, facing the gourmet, and she, like her father, was watching closely.

For at least a minute, the smelling process continued; then, without opening his eyes or moving his head, Pratt lowered the glass to his mouth and tipped in almost half the contents. He paused, his mouth full of wine, getting the first taste; then, he permitted some of it to trickle down his throat and I saw his Adam's apple move as it passed by. But most of it he retained in his mouth. And now, without swallowing again, he drew in through the lips a thin breath of air which mingled with the fumes of the wine in the mouth and passed on down into his lungs. He held the breath, blew it out through his nose, and finally began to roll the wine around under the tongue, and chewed it, actually chewed it with his teeth as though it were bread.

It was a solemn, impressive performance, and I must say he did it well.

"Urn," he said, putting down the glass, running a pink tongue over his lips, "Urn--yes. A very interesting little wine gentle and gracious, almost feminine in the after-taste."

There was an excess of saliva in his mouth, and as he spoke he spat an occasional bright speck of it on to the table.

"Now we can start to eliminate," he said. "You will pardon me for doing this carefully, but there is much at stake. Normally I would perhaps take a bit of a chance, leaping forward quickly and landing right in the middle of the vineyard of my choice. But this time--I must move cautiously this time, must I not?" He looked up at Mike and he smiled, a thick-lipped, wet-lipped smile. Mike did not smile back.

"First, then, which district in Bordeaux does this wine come from? That's not too difficult to guess. It is far too light in the body to be from either St Emilion or Graves. It is obviously a MŽdoc. There's no doubt about that.

"Now--from which commune in MŽdoc does it come? That also, by elimination, should not be too difficult to decide. Margaux? No. It cannot be Margaux. It has not the violent bouquet of a Margaux. Pauillac? It cannot be Pauillac, either. It is too tender, too gentle and wistful for Pauillac. The wine of Pauillac has a character that is almost imperious in its taste. And also, to me, a Pauillac contains just a little pith, a curious dusty, pithy flavour that the grape acquires from the soil of the district. No, no. This--this is a very gentle wine, demure and bashful in the first taste, emerging shyly but quite graciously in the second. A little arch, perhaps, in the second taste, and a little naughty also, teasing the tongue with a trace, just a trace of tannin. Then, in the after-taste, delightful--consoling and feminine, with a certain blithely generous quality that one associates only with the wines of the commune of St Julien. Unmistakably this is a St Julien."

He leaned back in his chair, held his hands up level with his chest, and placed the fingertips carefully together. He was becoming ridiculously Pompous, but I thought that some of it was deliberate, simply to mock his host. I found myself waiting rather tensely for him to go on. The girl Louise was lighting a cigarette. Pratt heard the match strike and he turned on her, flaring suddenly with real anger. "Please!" he said. "Please don't do that! It's a disgusting habit, to smoke at table!"

She looked up at him, still holding the burning match in one hand, the big slow eyes settling on his face, resting there a moment, moving away again, slow and contemptuous. She bent her head and blew out the match, but continued to hold the unlighted cigarette in her fingers.

"I'm sorry, my dear," Pratt said, "but I simply cannot have smoking at table."

She didn't look at him again.

"Now, let me see--where were we?" he said. "Ah, yes. This wine is from Bordeaux, from the commune of St Julien, in the district of MŽdoc. So far, so good. But now we come to the more difficult part--the name of the vineyard itself. For in St Julien there are many vineyards, and as our host so rightly remarked earlier on, there is often not much difference between the wine of one and wine of another. But we shall see."

He paused again, closing his eyes. "I am trying to establish the 'growth'," he said. "If I can do that, it will be half the battle. Now, let me see. This wine is obviously not from a first-growth vineyard nor even a second. It is not a great wine. The quality, the--the--what do you call it?--the radiance, the power, is lacking. But a third growth--that it could be. And yet I doubt it. We know it is a good year--our host has said so--and this is probably flattering it a little bit. I must be careful. I must be very careful here."

He picked up his glass and took another small sip.

"Yes," he said, sucking his lips, "I was right. It is a fourth growth. Now I am sure of it. A fourth growth from a very good year from a great year, in fact. And that's what made it taste for a moment like a third--or even a second-growth wine. Good! That's better! Now we are closing in! What are the fourth-growth vineyards in the commune of St Julien?"

Again he paused, took up his glass, and held the rim against that sagging, pendulous lower lip of his. Then I saw the tongue shoot out, pink and narrow, the tip of it dipping into the wine, withdrawing swiftly again--a repulsive sight. When he lowered the glass, his eyes remained closed, the face concentrated, only the lips moving, sliding over each other like two pieces of wet, spongy rubber.

"There it is again!" he cried. "Tannin in the middle taste, and the quick astringent squeeze upon the tongue. Yes, yes, of course! Now I have it! The wine comes from one of those small vineyards around Beychevelle. I remember now. The Beychevelle district, and the river and the little harbour that has silted up so the wine ships can no longer use it. Beychevelle... could it actually be a Beychevelle itself? No, I don't think so. Not quite. But it is somewhere very close. Chateau Talbot? Could it be Talbot? Yes, it could. Wait one moment."

He sipped the wine again, and out of the side of my eye I noticed Mike Schofield and how he was leaning farther and farther forward over the table, his mouth slightly open, his small eyes fixed upon Richard Pratt.

"No. I was wrong. It is not a Talbot. A Talbot comes forward to you just a little quicker than this one; the fruit is nearer the surface. If it is a '34, which I believe it is, then it couldn't be Talbot. Well, well. Let me think. It is not a Beychevelle and it is not a Talbot, and yet--yet it is so close to both of them, so close, that the vineyard must be almost in between. Now, which could that be?"

He hesitated, and we waited, watching his face. Everyone, even Mike's wife, was watching him now. I heard the maid put down the dish of vegetables on the sideboard behind me, gently, so as not to disturb the silence.

"Ah!" he cried. "I have it! Yes, I think I have it!"

For the last time, he sipped the wine. Then, still holding the glass up near his mouth, he turned to Mike and he smiled, a slow, silky smile, and he said, "You know what this is? This is the little Chateau Branaire-Ducru."

Mike sat tight, not moving.

"And the year, 1934."

We all looked at Mike, waiting for him to turn the bottle around in its basket and show the label.

"Is that your final answer?" Mike said.

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, is it or isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"What was the name again?"

"Chateau Branaire-Ducru. Pretty little vineyard. Lovely old chateau. Know it quite well. Can't think why I didn't recognize it at once."

"Come on, Daddy," the girl said. "Turn it round and let's have a peek. I want my two houses."

"Just a minute," Mike said. "Wait just a minute." He was sitting very quiet, bewildered looking, and his face was becoming puffy and pale, as though all the force was draining slowly out of him.

"Michael!" his wife called sharply from the other end of the table. "What's the matter?"

"Keep out of this, Margaret, will you please."

Richard Pratt was looking at Mike, smiling with his mouth, his eyes small and bright. Mike was not looking at anyone.

"Daddy!" the daughter cried, agonized. "But, Daddy, you don't mean to say he guessed it right!"

"Now, stop worrying, my dear," Mike said. "There's nothing to worry about."

I think it was more to get away from his family than anything else that Mike then turned to Richard Pratt and said, "I'll tell you what, Richard. I think you and I better slip off into the next room and have a little chat."

"I don't want a little chat," Pratt said. "All I want is to see the label on that bottle." He knew he was a winner now; he had the bearing, the quiet arrogance of a winner, and I could see that he was prepared to become thoroughly nasty if there was any trouble. "What are you waiting for?" he said to Mike. "Go on and turn it round."

Then this happened: the maid, the tiny, erect figure of the maid in her white-and-black uniform, was standing beside Richard Pratt, holding something

out in her hand. "I believe these are yours, sir," she said.

Pratt glanced around, saw the pair of thin horn-rimmed spectacles that she held out to him, and for a moment he hesitated. "Are they? Perhaps they are, I don't know."

"Yes, sir, they're yours." The maid was an elderly woman--nearer seventy than sixty--a faithful family retainer of many years' standing. She put the spectacles down on the table beside him.

Without thanking her, Pratt took them up and slipped them into his top pocket, behind the white handkerchief.

But the maid didn't go away. She remained standing beside and slightly behind Richard Pratt, and there was something so unusual in her manner and in the way she stood there, small, motionless and erect, that I for one found myself watching her with a sudden apprehension. Her old grey face had a frosty, determined look, the lips were compressed, the little chin was out, and the hands were clasped together tight before her. The curious cap on her head and the flash of white down the front of her uniform made her seem like some tiny, ruffled, white-breasted bird.

"You left them in Mr Schofield's study," she said. Her voice was unnaturally, deliberately polite. "On top of the green filing cabinet in his study, sir, when you happened to go in there by yourself before dinner."

It took a few moments for the full meaning of her words to penetrate, and in the silence that followed I became aware of Mike and how he was slowly drawing himself up in his chair, and the colour coming to his face, and the eyes opening wide, and the curl of the mouth, and the dangerous little patch of whiteness beginning to spread around the area of the nostrils.

"Now, Michael!" his wife said. "Keep calm now, Michael dear! Keep calm!"

Lamb to the Slaughter

THE room was warm and clean, the curtains drawn, the two table lamps alight--hers and the one by the empty chair opposite. On the sideboard behind her, two tall glasses, soda water, whisky. Fresh ice cubes in the Thermos bucket.

Mary Maloney was waiting for her husband to come home from work.

Now and again she would glance up at the clock, but without anxiety, merely to please herself with the thought that each minute gone by made it nearer the time when he would come. There was a slow smiling air about her, and about everything she did. The drop of the head as she bent over her sewing was curiously tranquil. Her skin--for this was her sixth month with chil

d--had acquired a wonderful translucent quality, the mouth was soft, and the eyes, with their new placid look, seemed larger, darker than before.

When the clock said ten minutes to five, she began to listen, and a few moments later, punctually as always, she heard the tyres on the gravel outside, and the car door slamming, the footsteps passing the window, the key turning in the lock. She laid aside her sewing, stood up, and went forward to kiss him as he came in.

"Hullo, darling," she said.

"Hullo," he answered. She took his coat and hung it in the closet. Then she walked over and made the drinks, a strongish one for him, a weak one for herself; and soon she was back again in her chair with the sewing, and he in the other, opposite, holding the tall glass with both his hands, rocking it so the ice cubes tinkled against the side.

For her, this was always a blissful time of day. She knew he didn't want to speak much until the first drink was finished, and she, on her side, was content to sit quietly, enjoying his company after the long hours alone in the house. She loved to luxuriate in the presence of this man, and to feel--almost as a sunbather feels the sun that warm male glow that came out of him to her when they were alone together. She loved him for the way he sat loosely in a chair, for the way he came in a door, or moved slowly across the room with long strides. She loved the intent, far look in his eyes when they rested on her, the funny shape of the mouth, and especially the way he remained silent about his tiredness, sitting still with himself until the whisky had taken some of it away.

"Tired, darling?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm tired." And as he spoke, he did an unusual thing. He lifted his glass and drained it in one swallow although there was still half of it, at least half of it, left. She wasn't really watching him but she knew what he had done because she heard the ice cubes falling back against the bottom of the empty glass when he lowered his arm. He paused a moment, leaning forward in the chair, then he got up and went slowly over to fetch himself another.

"I'll get it!" she cried, jumping up.

"Sit down," he said.

When he came back, she noticed that the new drink was dark amber with the quantity of whisky in it.

"Darling, shall I get your slippers?"

She watched him as he began to sip the dark yellow drink, and she could see little oily swirls in the liquid because it was so strong.

"I think it's a shame," she said, "that when a policeman gets to be as senior as you, they keep him walking about on his feet all day long."

He didn't answer, so she bent her head again and went on with her sewing;

but each time he lifted the drink to his lips, she heard the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass.

"Darling," she said. "Would you like me to get you some cheese? I haven't made any supper because it's Thursday."

"No," he said.

"If you're too tired to eat out," she went on, "it's still not too late. There's plenty of meat and stuff in the freezer, and you can have it right here and not even move out of the chair."

Her eyes waited on him for an answer, a smile, a little nod, but he made no sign.

"Anyway," she went on, "I'll get you some cheese and crackers first."

"I don't want it," he said.

She moved uneasily in her chair, the large eyes still watching his face. "But you must have supper. I can easily do it here. I'd like to do it. We can have lamb chops. Or pork. Anything you want. Everything's in the freezer."

"Forget it," he said.

"But, darling, you must eat! I'll fix it anyway, and then you can have it or not, as you like."

She stood up and placed her sewing on the table by the lamp.

"Sit down," he said. "Just for a minute, sit down."

It wasn't till then that she began to get frightened.

"Go on," he said. "Sit down."

She lowered herself back slowly into the chair, watching him all the time with those large, bewildered eyes. He had finished the second drink and was staring down into the glass frowning.

"Listen," he said, "I've got something to tell you."

"What is it, darling? 'What's the matter?'"

He had become absolutely motionless, and he kept his head down so that the light from the lamp beside him fell across the upper part of his face, leaving the chin and mouth in shadow. She noticed there was a little muscle moving near the corner of his left eye.

"This is going to be a bit of a shock to you, I'm afraid," he said. "But I've thought about it a good deal and I've decided the only thing to do is tell you right away. I hope you won't blame me too much."

And he told her. It didn't take long, four or five minutes at most, and she sat very still through it all, watching him with a kind of dazed horror as he went further and further away from her with each word.

"So there it is," he added. "And I know it's kind of a bad time to be telling you, but there simply wasn't any other way. Of course I'll give you money and see you're looked after. But there needn't really be any fuss. I hope not anyway. It wouldn't be very good for my job."

Her first instinct was not to believe any of it, to reject it all. It occu

red to her that perhaps he hadn't even spoken, that she herself had imagined the whole thing. Maybe, if she went about her business and acted as though she hadn't been listening, then later, when she sort of woke up again, she might find none of it had ever happened.

"I'll get the supper," she managed to whisper, and this time he didn't stop her.

When she walked across the room she couldn't feel her feet touching the floor. She couldn't feel anything at all--except a slight nausea and a desire to vomit. Everything was automatic now--down the stairs to the cellar, the light switch, the deep freeze, the hand inside the cabinet taking hold of the first object it met. She lifted it out, and looked at it. It was wrapped in paper, so she took off the paper and looked at it again.

A leg of lamb.

All right then, they would have lamb for supper. She carried it upstairs, holding the thin bone-end of it with both her hands, and as she went through the living-room, she saw him standing over by the window with his back to her, and she stopped.

"For God's sake," he said, hearing her, but not turning round. "Don't make supper for me. I'm going out."

At that point, Mary Maloney simply walked up behind him and without any pause she swung the big frozen leg of lamb high in the air and brought it down as hard as she could on the back of his head.

She might just as well have hit him with a steel club.

She stepped back a pace, waiting, and the funny thing was that he remained standing there for at least four or five seconds, gently swaying. Then he crashed to the carpet.

The violence of the crash, the noise, the small table overturning, helped bring her out of the shock. She came out slowly, feeling cold and surprised, and she stood for a while blinking at the body, still holding the ridiculous piece of meat tight with both hands.

All right, she told herself. So I've killed him.

It was extraordinary, now, how clear her mind became all of a sudden. She began thinking very fast. As the wife of a detective, she knew quite well what the penalty would be. That was fine. It made no difference to her. In fact, it would be a relief. On the other hand, what about the child? What were the laws about murderers with unborn children? Did they kill them both--mother and child? Or did they wait until the tenth month? What did they do?

Mary Maloney didn't know. And she certainly wasn't prepared to take a chance.

She carried the meat into the kitchen, placed it in a pan, turned the oven on high, and shoved it inside. Then she washed her hands and ran upstairs to the bedroom. She sat down before the mirror, tidied her face, touched up her

her lips and face. She tried a smile. It came out rather peculiar. She tried again.

"Hullo Sam," she said brightly, aloud.

The voice sounded peculiar too.

"I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas."

That was better. Both the smile and the voice were coming out better now. She rehearsed it several times more. Then she ran downstairs, took her coat, went out the back door, down the garden, into the street.

It wasn't six o'clock yet and the lights were still on in the grocery shop.

"Hullo Sam," she said brightly, smiling at the man behind the counter.

"Why, good evening, Mrs Maloney. How're you?"

"I want some potatoes please, Sam. Yes, and I think a can of peas."

The man turned and reached up behind him on the shelf for the peas.

"Patrick's decided he's tired and doesn't want to eat out tonight," she told him. "We usually go out Thursdays, you know, and now he's caught me without any vegetables in the house."

"Then how about meat, Mrs Maloney?"

"No, I've got meat, thanks. I got a nice leg of lamb, from the freezer."

"Oh."

"I don't much like cooking it frozen, Sam, but I'm taking a chance on it this time. You think it'll be all right?"

"Personally," the grocer said, "I don't believe it makes any difference. You want these Idaho potatoes?"

"Oh yes, that'll be fine. Two of those."

"Anything else?" The grocer cocked his head on one side, looking at her pleasantly. "How about afterwards? What you going to give him for afterwards?"

"Well what would you suggest, Sam?"

The man glanced around his shop. "How about a nice big slice of cheesecake? I know he likes that."

"Perfect," she said. "He loves it."

And when it was all wrapped and she had paid she put on her brightest smile and said, "Thank you, Sam. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs Maloney. And thank you."

And now, she told herself as she hurried back, all she was doing now, as she was returning home to her husband and he was waiting for his supper; and she must cook it good, and make it as tasty as possible because the poor man was tired; and if, when she entered the house, she happened to find anything unusual, or tragic, or terrible, then naturally it would be a shock and she'd become frantic with grief and horror. Mind you, she wasn't expecting to find anything. She was just going home with the vegetables. Mrs Patrick Maloney going home with the vegetables on Thursday evening to cook supper

for her husband.

That's the way, she told herself. Do everything right and natural. Keep things absolutely natural and there'll be no need for any acting at all.

Therefore, when she entered the kitchen by the back door, she was humming a little tune to herself and smiling.

"Patrick!" she called. "How are you darling?"

She put the parcel down on the table and went through into the living-room; and when she saw him lying there on the floor with his legs doubled up and one arm twisted back underneath his body, it really was rather a shock. All the old love and longing for him welled up inside her, and she ran over to him, knelt down beside him, and began to cry her heart out. It was easy. No acting was necessary.

A few minutes later she got up and went to the phone. She knew the number of the police station, and when the man at the other end answered, she cried to him, "Quick! Come quick! Patrick's dead!"

"Who's speaking?"

"Mrs Maloney. Mrs Patrick Maloney."

"You mean Patrick Maloney's dead?"

"I think so," she sobbed. "He's lying on the floor and I think he's dead."

"Be right over," the man said.

The car came over quickly, and when she opened the front door, two policemen walked in. She knew them both--she knew nearly all the men at that precinct--and she fell right into Jack Noonan's arms, weeping hysterically. He put her gently into a chair, then went over to join the other one, who was called O'Malley, kneeling by the body.

"Is he dead?" she cried.

"I'm afraid he is. What happened?"

Briefly, she told her story about going out to the grocer and coming back to find him on the floor. While she was talking, crying and talking, Noonan discovered a small patch of congealed blood on the dead man's head. He showed it to O'Malley who got up at once and hurried to the phone.

Soon, other men began to come into the house. First a doctor, then two detectives, one of whom she knew by name. Later, a police photographer arrived and took pictures, and a man who knew about fingerprints. There was a great deal of whispering and muttering beside the corpse, and the detectives kept asking her a lot of questions. But they always treated her kindly. She told her story again, this time right from the beginning, when Patrick had come in, and she was sewing, and he was tired, so tired he hadn't wanted to go out for supper. She told how she'd put the meat in the oven--"it's there now, cooking"--and how she'd slipped out to the grocer for vegetables, and come back to find him lying on the floor.

"Which grocer?" one of the detectives asked.

She told him, and he turned and whispered something to the other detective who immediately went outside into the street.

In fifteen minutes he was back with a page of notes, and there was more whispering, and through her sobbing she heard a few of the whispered phrases "... acted quite normal very cheerful... wanted to give him a good supper.. . peas... cheesecake... impossible that she..

After a while, the photographer and the doctor departed and two other men came in and took the corpse away on a stretcher. Then the fingerprint man went away. The two detectives remained, and so did the two policemen. They were exceptionally nice to her, and Jack Noonan asked if she wouldn't rather go somewhere else, to her sister's house perhaps, or to his own wife who would take care of her and put her up for the night.

No, she said. She didn't feel she could move even a yard at the moment. Would they mind awfully if she stayed just where she was until she felt better? She didn't feel too good at the moment, she really didn't.

Then hadn't she better lie down on the bed? Jack Noonan asked.

No, she said, she'd like to stay right where she was, in this chair. A little later perhaps, when she felt better, she would move.

So they left her there while they went about their business, searching the house. Occasionally one of the detectives asked her another question. Sometimes Jack Noonan spoke to her gently as he passed by. Her husband, he told her, had been killed by a blow on the back of the head administered with a heavy blunt instrument, almost certainly a large piece of metal. They were looking for the weapon. The murderer may have taken it with him, but on the other hand he may've thrown it away or hidden it somewhere on the premises.

"It's the old story," he said. "Get the weapon, and you've got the man."

Later, one of the detectives came up and sat beside her. Did she know, he asked, of anything in the house that could've been used as the weapon? Would she mind having a look around to see if anything was missing a very big spanner for example, or a heavy metal vase.

They didn't have any heavy metal vases, she said.

"Or a big spanner?"

She didn't think they had a big spanner. But there might be some things like that in the garage.

The search went on. She knew that there were other policemen in the garden all around the house. She could hear their footsteps on the gravel outside, and sometimes she saw the flash of a torch through a chink in the curtains. It began to get late, nearly nine she noticed by the clock on the mantel.

The four men searching the rooms seemed to be growing weary, a trifle exasperated.

"Jack," she said, the next time Sergeant Noonan went by. "Would you mi

nd giving me a drink?"

"Sure I'll give you a drink. You mean this whisky?"

"Yes, please. But just a small one. It might make me feel better."

He handed her the glass. "Why don't you have one yourself," she said. "You must be awfully tired. Please do. You've been very good to me."

"Well," he answered. "It's not strictly allowed, but I might take just a drop to keep me going."

One by one the others came in and were persuaded to take a little nip of whisky. They stood around rather awkwardly with the drinks in their hands, uncomfortable in her presence, trying to say consoling things to her. Sergeant Noonan wandered into the kitchen, came out quickly and said, "Look, Mrs Maloney. You know that oven of yours is still on, and the meat still inside."

"Oh dear me!" she cried. "So it is!"

"I better turn it off for you, hadn't I?"

"Will you do that, Jack. Thank you so much."

When the sergeant returned the second time, she looked at him with her large, dark, tearful eyes. "Jack Noonan," she said.

"Yes?"

"Would you do me a small favour--you and these others?"

"We can try, Mrs Maloney."

"Well," she said. "Here you all are, and good friends of dear Patrick's too, and helping to catch the man who killed him. You must be terribly hungry by now because it's long past your supper time, and I know Patrick would never forgive me, God bless his soul, if I allowed you to remain in his house without offering you decent hospitality. Why don't you eat up that lamb that's in the oven? It'll be cooked just right by now."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Sergeant Noonan said.

"Please," she begged. "Please eat it. Personally I couldn't touch a thing, certainly not what's been in the house when he was here. But it's all right for you. It'd be a favour to me if you'd eat it up. Then you can go on with your work again afterwards."

There was a good deal of hesitating among the four policemen, but they were clearly hungry, and in the end they were persuaded to go into the kitchen and help themselves. The woman stayed where she was, listening to them through the open door, and she could hear them speaking among themselves, their voices thick and sloppy because their mouths were full of meat.

"Have some more, Charlie?"

"No. Better not finish it."

"She wants us to finish it. She said so. Be doing her a favour."

"Okay then. Give me some more."

"That is the hell of a big club the guy must've used to hit poor Patrick,

"one of them was saying. "The doc says his skull was smashed all to pieces just like from a sledge-hammer."

"That is why it ought to be easy to find."

"Exactly what I say."

"Whoever done it, they're not going to be carrying a thing like that around with them longer than they need."

One of them belched. "Personally, I think it's right here on the premises."

"Probably right under our very noses. What you think, Jack?"

And in the other room, Mary Maloney began to giggle.

Man from the South

IT was getting on towards six o'clock so I thought I'd buy myself a beer and go out and sit in a deckchair by the swimming pool and have a little evening sun.

I went to the bar and got the beer and carried it outside and wandered down the garden towards the pool.

It was a fine garden with lawns and beds of azaleas and tall coconut palms, and the wind was blowing strongly through the tops of the palm trees, making the leaves hiss and crackle as though they were on fire. I could see the clusters of big brown nuts hanging down underneath the leaves.

There were plenty of deck chairs around the swimming pool and there were white tables and huge brightly coloured umbrellas and sunburned men and women sitting around in bathing suits. In the pool itself there were three or four girls and about a dozen boys, all splashing about and making a lot of noise and throwing a large rubber ball at one another.

I stood watching them. The girls were English girls from the hotel. The boys I didn't know about, but they sounded American, and I thought they were probably naval cadets who'd come ashore from the US naval training vessel which had arrived in harbour that morning.

I went over and sat down under a yellow umbrella where there were four empty seats, and I poured my beer and settled back comfortably with a cigarette.

It was very pleasant sitting there in the sunshine with beer and cigarette. It was pleasant to sit and watch the bathers splashing about in the green water.

The American sailors were getting on nicely with the English girls. They'd reached the stage where they were diving under the water and tipping them up by their legs.

Just then I noticed a small, oldish man walking briskly around the edge

of the pool. He was immaculately dressed in a white suit and he walked very quickly with little bouncing strides, pushing himself high up on to his toes with each step. He had on a large creamy Panama hat, and he came bouncing a long the side of the pool, looking at the people and the chairs.

He stopped beside me and smiled, showing two rows of very small, uneven teeth, slightly tarnished. I smiled back.

"Excuse pleess, but may I sit here?"

"Certainly," I said. "Go ahead."

He bobbed around to the back of the chair and inspected it for safety, then he sat down and crossed his legs. His white buckskin shoes had little holes punched all over them for ventilation.

"A fine evening," he said. "They are all evenings fine here in Jamaica." I couldn't tell if the accent were Italian or Spanish, but I felt fairly sure he was some sort of a South American. And old too, when you saw him close. Probably around sixty-eight or seventy.

"Yes," I said. "It is wonderful here, isn't it."

"And who, might I ask, are all dese? Dese is no hotel people." He was pointing at the bathers in the pool.

"I think they're American sailors," I told him. "They're Americans who are learning to be sailors."

"Of course dey are Americans. Who else in de world is going to make a s much noise as dat? You are not American no?"

"No," I said. "I am not."

Suddenly one of the American cadets was standing in front of us. He was dripping wet from the pool and one of the English girls was standing there with him.

"Are these chairs taken?" he said.

"No," I answered.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Go ahead."

"Thanks," he said. He had a towel in his hand and when he sat down he unrolled it and produced a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He offered the cigarettes to the girl and she refused; then he offered them to me and I took one. The little man said, "Tank you, no, but I tink I have a cigar." He pulled out a crocodile case and got himself a cigar, then he produced a knife which had a small scissors in it and he snipped the end off the cigar.

"Here, let me give you a light." The American boy held up his lighter.

"Dat will not work in dis wind."

"Sure it'll work. It always works." The little man removed his unlighted cigar from his mouth, cocked his head on one side and looked at the boy.

"All-ways?" he said slowly.

"Sure, it never fails. Not with me anyway."

The little man's head was still cocked over on one side and he was still watching the boy. "Well, well. So you say dis famous lighter it never fails. Is s dat you say?"

"Sure," the boy said. "That's right." He was about nineteen or twenty with a long freckled face and a rather sharp birdlike nose. His chest was not very sunburned and there were freckles there too, and a few wisps of pale-reddish hair. He was holding the lighter in his right hand, ready to flip the wheel. "It never fails," he said, smiling now because he was purposely exaggerating his little boast. "I promise you it never fails."

"One momint, pleess." The hand that held the cigar came up high, palm outward, as though it were stopping traffic. "Now juss one momint." He had a curiously soft, toneless voice and he kept looking at the boy all the time.

"Shall we not perhaps make a little bet on dat?" He smiled at the boy. "Shall we not make a little bet on whether your lighter lights?"

"Sure, I'll bet," the boy said. "Why not?"

"You like to bet?"

"Sure, I'll always bet."

The man paused and examined his cigar, and I must say I didn't much like the way he was behaving. It seemed he was already trying to make something out of this, and to embarrass the boy, and at the same time I had the feeling he was relishing a private little secret all his own.

He looked up again at the boy and said slowly, "I like to bet, too. Why we don't have a good bet on dis ting? A good big bet."

"Now wait a minute," the boy said. "I can't do that. But I'll bet you a quarter. I'll even bet you a dollar, or whatever it is over here--some shillings, I guess."

The little man waved his hand again. "Listen to me. Now we have some fun. We make a bet. Den we go up to my room here in de hotel where iss no wind and I bet you you cannot light dis famous lighter of yours ten times running without missing once."

"I'll bet I can," the boy said.

"All right. Good. We make a bet, yes?"

"Sure, I'll bet you a buck."

"No, no I make you a very good bet. I am rich man and I am sporting man also. Listen to me. Outside de hotel iss my car. Iss very fine car. American car from your country. Cadillac-- "Hey, now. Wait a minute." The boy leaned back in his deck-chair and he laughed. "I can't put up that sort of property. This is crazy."

"Not crazy at all. You strike lighter successfully ten times running and Cadillac is yours. You like to have dis Cadillac, yes?"

"Sure, I'd like to have a Cadillac." The boy was still grinning.

"All right. Fine. We make a bet and I put up my Cadillac."

"And what do I put up?" The little man carefully removed the red band from his still unlighted cigar. "I never ask you, my friend, to bet something you cannot afford. You understand?"

"Then what do I bet?"

"I make it very easy for you, yes?"

"Okay. You make it easy."

"Some small thing you can afford to give away, and if you did happen to lose it you would not feel too bad. Right?"

"Such as what?"

"Such as, perhaps, de little finger on your left hand."

"My what?" The boy stopped grinning.

"Yes. Why not? You win, you take de car. You boss, I take de finger."

"I don't get it. How d'you mean, you take the finger?"

"I chop it off."

"Jumping jeeppers! That's a crazy bet. I think I'll just make it a dollar."

The little man leaned back, spread out his hands palms upwards and gave a tiny contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, "Well, well, well," he said. "I do not understand. You say it lights but you will not bet. Den we forget it, yes?"

The boy sat quite still, staring at the bathers in the pool. Then he remembered suddenly he hadn't lighted his cigarette. He put it between his lips, cupped his hands around the lighter and flipped the wheel. The wick lighted and burned with a small, steady, yellow flame and the way he held his hands the wind didn't get to it at all. "Could I have a light, too?" I said.

"God, I'm sorry, I forgot you didn't have one."

I held out my hand for the lighter, but he stood up and came over to do it for me.

"Thank you," I said, and he returned to his seat.

"You having a good time?" I asked.

"Fine," he answered. "It's pretty nice here."

There was a silence then, and I could see that the little man had succeeded in disturbing the boy with his absurd proposal. He was sitting there very still, and it was obvious that a small tension was beginning to build up inside him. Then he started shifting about in his seat, and rubbing his chest, and stroking the back of his neck, and finally he placed both hands on his knees and began tap-tapping with his fingers against the kneecaps. Soon he was tapping with one of his feet as well.

"Now just let me check up on this bet of yours," he said at last. "You say we go up to your room and if I make this lighter light ten times running I win a Cadillac. If it misses just once then I forfeit the little finger of my left hand. Is that right?"

"Certainly. Dat is de bet. But I tink you are afraid."

"What do we do if I lose? Do I have to hold my finger out while you chop it off?"

"Oh, no! Dat would be no good. And you might be tempted to refuse to hold it out. What I should do I should tie one of your hands to de table before we started and I should stand dere with a knife ready to go chop de moment your lighter missed."

"What year is the Cadillac?" the boy asked.

"Excuse. I not understand."

"What year--how old is the Cadillac?"

"Ah! How old? Yes. It is last year. Quite new car. But I see you are not betting man. Americans never are."

The boy paused for just a moment and he glanced first at the English girl, then at me. "Yes," he said sharply. "I'll bet you."

"Good!" The little man clapped his hands together quietly, once. "Fine," he said. "We do it now. And you, sir," he turned to me, "you would perhaps be good enough to, what you call it, to to referee." He had pale, almost colourless eyes with tiny bright black pupils.

"Well," I said. "I think it's a crazy bet. I don't think I like it very much."

"Nor do I," said the English girl. It was the first time she'd spoken. "I think it's a stupid, ridiculous bet."

"Are you serious about cutting off this boy's finger if he loses?" I said.

"Certainly I am. Also about giving him Cadillac if he win. Come now. We go to my room."

He stood up. "You like to put on some clothes first?" he said.

"No," the boy answered. "I'll come like this." Then he turned to me. "I'd consider it a favour if you'd come along and referee."

"All right," I said. "I'll come along, but I don't like the bet."

"You come too," he said to the girl. "You come and watch."

The little man led the way back through the garden to the hotel. He was animated now, and excited, and that seemed to make him bounce up higher than ever on his toes as he walked along.

"I live in annexe," he said. "You like to see car first? Iss just here."

He took us to where we could see the front driveway of the hotel and he stopped and pointed to a sleek pale-green Cadillac parked close by.

"Dere she iss. De green one. You like?"

"Say, that's a nice car," the boy said.

"All right. Now we go up and see if you can win her."

We followed him into the annexe and up one flight of stairs. He unlocked his door and we all trooped into what was a large pleasant double bedroom. There was a woman's dressing-gown lying across the bottom of one of the beds.

"First," he said, "we 'ave a little Martini."

The drinks were on a small table in the far corner, all ready to be mixed, and there was a shaker and ice and plenty of glasses. He began to make the Martini, but meanwhile he'd rung the bell and now there was a knock on the door and a coloured maid came in.

"Ah!" he said, putting down the bottle of gin, taking a wallet from his pocket and pulling out a pound note. "You will do something for me flow, please." He gave the maid the pound.

"You keep dat," he said. "And now we are going to play a little game in here and I want you to go off and find for me two no tree tings. I want some nails, I want a hammer, and I want a chopping knife, a butcher's chopping knife which you can borrow from de kitchen. You can get, yes?"

"A chopping knife!" The maid opened her eyes wide and clasped her hands in front of her. "You mean a real chopping knife?"

"Yes, yes, of course. Come on now, please. You can find dose tings surely for me."

"Yes, sir, I'll try, sir. Surely I'll try to get them." And she went.

The little man handed round the Martinis. We stood there and sipped them, the boy with the long freckled face and the pointed nose, bare-bodied except for a pair of faded brown bathing shorts; the English girl, a large-boned fair-haired girl wearing a pale blue bathing suit, who watched the boy over the top of her glass all the time; the little man with the colourless eyes standing there in his immaculate white suit drinking his Martini and looking at the girl in her pale blue bathing dress. I didn't know what to make of it all. The man seemed serious about the bet and he seemed serious about the business of cutting off the finger. But hell, what if the boy lost? Then we'd have to rush him to the hospital in the Cadillac that he hadn't won. That would be a fine thing. Now wouldn't that be a really fine thing? It would be a damn silly unnecessary thing so far as I could see.

"Don't you think this is rather a silly bet?" I said. "I think it's a fine bet," the boy answered. He had already downed one large Martini.

"I think it's a stupid, ridiculous bet," the girl said. "What'll happen if you lose?"

"It won't matter. Come to think of it, I can't remember ever in my life having had any use for the little finger on my left hand. Here he is." The boy took hold of the finger. "Here he is and he hasn't ever done a thing for me yet. So why shouldn't I bet him? I think it's a fine bet."

The little man smiled and picked up the shaker and refilled our glasses.

"Before we begin," he said, "I will present to de--to de referee de key of de car." He produced a car key from his pocket and gave it to me. "De papers," he said, "de owning papers and insurance are in de pocket of de car."

Then the coloured maid came in again. In one hand she carried a small chopper, the kind used by butchers for chopping meat bones, and in the other

a hammer and a bag of nails.

"Good! You get dem all. Tank you, tank you. Now you can go." He waited until the maid had closed the door, then he put the implements on one of the beds and said, "Now we prepare ourselves, yes?" And to the boy, "Help me, pleess, with dis table. We carry it out a little."

It was the usual kind of hotel writing desk, just a plain rectangular table about four feet by three with a blotting pad, ink, pens and paper. They carried it out into the room away from the wall, and removed the writing things.

"And now," he said, "a chair." He picked up a chair and placed it beside the table. He was very brisk and very animated, like a person organizing games at a children's party. "And now de nails. I must put in de nails." He fetched the nails and he began to hammer them into the top of the table.

We stood there, the boy, the girl, and I, holding Martinis in our hands, watching the little man at work. We watched him hammer two nails into the table, about six inches apart. He didn't hammer them right home; he allowed a small part of each one to stick up. Then he tested them for firmness with his fingers.

Anyone would think the son of a bitch had done this before, I told myself. He never hesitates. Table, nails, hammer, kitchen chopper. He knows exactly what he needs and how to arrange it.

"And now," he said, "all we want is some string." He found some string. "All right, at last we are ready. Will you pleess to sit here at de table?" he said to the boy.

The boy put his glass away and sat down.

"Now place de left hand between dese two nails. De nails are only so I can tie your hand in place. All right, good. Now I tie your hand secure to de table--so."

He wound the string around the boy's wrist, then several times around the wide part of the hand, then he fastened it tight to the nails. He made a good job of it and when he'd finished there wasn't any question about the boy being able to draw his hand away. But he could move his fingers. "Now pleess, clenche de fist, all except for de little finger. You must leave de little finger sticking out, lying on de table."

"Ex-cellent! Ex-cellent! Now we are ready. Wid your right hand you manipulate de lighter. But one moment, pleess."

He skipped over to the bed and picked up the chopper. He came back and stood beside the table with the chopper in his hand.

"We are all ready?" he said. "Mister referee, you must say to begin."

The English girl was standing there in her pale blue bathing costume right behind the boy's chair. She was just standing there, not saying anything. The boy was sitting quite still holding the lighter in his right hand, looking at the chopper. The little man was looking at me.

"Are you ready?" I asked the boy.

"I'm ready."

"And you?" to the little man.

"Quite ready," he said and he lifted the chopper up in the air and held it there about two feet above the boy's finger, ready to chop. The boy watched it, but didn't flinch and his mouth didn't move at all. He merely raised his eyebrows and frowned.

"All right," I said. "Go ahead."

The boy said, "Will you please count aloud the number of times I light it."

"Yes," I said. "I'll do that."

With his thumb he raised the top of the lighter, and again with the thumb he gave the wheel a sharp flick. The flint sparked and the wick caught fire and burned with a small yellow flame.

"One!" I called.

He didn't blow the flame out; he closed the top of the lighter on it and he waited for perhaps five seconds before opening it again.

He flicked the wheel very strongly and once more there was a small flame burning on the wick.

"Two!"

No one else said anything. The boy kept his eyes on the lighter. The little man held the chopper up in the air and he too was watching the lighter.

"Three!"

"Four!"

"Five!"

"Six!"

"Seven!" Obviously it was one of those lighters that worked. The flint gave a big spark and the wick was the right length. I watched the thumb snapping the top down on to the flame. Then a pause. Then the thumb raising the top once more. This was an all-thumb operation. The thumb did everything. I took a breath, ready to say eight. The thumb flicked the wheel. The flint sparked. The little flame appeared.

"Eight!" I said, and as I said it the door opened. We all turned and we saw a woman standing in the doorway, a small, black-haired woman, rather old, who stood there for about two seconds then rushed forward, shouting, "Carlos! Carlos!" She grabbed his wrist, took the chopper from him, threw it on the bed, took hold of the little man by the lapels of his white suit and began shaking him very vigorously, talking to him fast and loud and fiercely all the time in some Spanish-sounding language. She shook him so fast you couldn't see him any more. He became a faint, misty, quickly moving outline, like the spokes of a turning wheel.

Then she slowed down and the little man came into view again and she hau

led him across the room and pushed him backwards on to one of the beds. He sat on the edge of it blinking his eyes and testing his head to see if it would still turn on his neck.

"I am sorry," the woman said. "I am so terribly sorry that this should happen." She spoke almost perfect English.

"It is too bad," she went on. "I suppose it is really my fault. For ten minutes I leave him alone to go and have my hair washed and I come back and he is at it again." She looked sorry and deeply concerned.

The boy was untying his hand from the table. The English girl and I stood there and said nothing.

"He is a menace," the woman said. "Down where we live at home he has taken altogether forty-seven fingers from different people, and has lost eleven cars. In the end they threatened to have him put away somewhere. That's why I brought him up here."

"We were only having a little bet," mumbled the little man from the bed.

"I suppose he bet you a car," the woman said. "Yes," the boy answered. "A Cadillac."

"He has no car. It's mine. And that makes it worse," she said, "that he should bet you when he has nothing to bet with. I am ashamed and very sorry about it all." She seemed an awfully nice woman.

"Well," I said, "then here's the key of your car." I put it on the table.

"We were only having a little bet," mumbled the little man.

"He hasn't anything left to bet with," the woman said. "He hasn't a thing in the world. Not a thing. As a matter of fact I myself won it all from him a long while ago. It took time, a lot of time, and it was hard work, but I won it all in the end." She looked up at the boy and she smiled, a slow sad smile, and she came over and put out a hand to take the key from the table.

I can see it now, that hand of hers; it had only one finger on it, The Soldier I T was one of those nights that made him feel he knew what it was like to be a blind man; not the shadow of an image for his eyes to discern, not even the forms of the trees visible against the sky.

Out of the darkness he became aware of small rustling noises in the hedge, the breathing of a horse some distance away in the field, the soft thud of a hoof as it moved its foot; and once he heard the rush of a bird flying past him low overhead.

"Jock," he said, speaking loud. "We'll go home now." And he turned and began to walk back up the slope of the lane, the dog pulling ahead, showing the way in the dark.

It must be nearly midnight, he thought. That meant that soon it would be tomorrow. Tomorrow was worse than today. Tomorrow was the worst of all because it was going to become today--and today was now.

Today had not been very nice, especially that business with the splinter.

Stop it, he told himself. There isn't any sense thinking about it. It doesn't do anyone any good thinking about things like that. Think about something else for a change. You can kick out a dangerous thought, you know, if you put another in its place. Go right back as far as you can go. Let's have some memories of sweet days. The seaside holidays in the summer, wet sand and red buckets and shrimping nets and the slippery seaweedy rocks and the small clear pools and sea anemones and snails and mussels and sometimes one grey translucent shrimp hovering deep down in the beautiful green water.

But how could that splinter have got into the sole of his foot without him feeling it?

It is not important. Do you remember hunting for cowries along the margin of the tide, each one so fine and perfect it became a precious jewel to be held in the hand all the way home; and the little orange-coloured scallops, the pearly oyster shells, the tiny bits of emerald glass, a live hermit crab, a cockle, the spine of a skate, and once, but never to be forgotten, the dry seawashed jawbone of a human being with teeth in it, white and wonderful among the shells and pebbles. Oh Mummy, look what I've found! Look, Mummy, look!

But to go back to the splinter. She had really been rather unpleasant about that.

"What do you mean, you didn't notice?" she had asked, scornful.

"I just didn't notice, that's all."

"I suppose you're going to tell me if I stick a pin into your foot you won't feel it?"

"I didn't say that."

And then she had jabbed him suddenly in the ankle with the pin she had been using to take out the splinter, and he hadn't been watching so he didn't know about it till she had cried out in a kind of horror. And when he had looked down, the pin was sticking into the flesh all by itself behind the anklebone, almost half of it buried. "Take it out," he had said. "You can poison someone like that."

"You mean you can't feel it?"

"Take it out, will you?"

"You mean it doesn't hurt?"

"The pain is terrible. Take it out."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I said the pain is terrible. Didn't you hear me?"

Why did they do things like that to him?

When I was down beside the sea, a wooden spade they gave to me, to dig the sandy shore. My holes were empty as a cup, and every time the sea came up, till it could come no more.

A year ago the doctor had said, "Shut your eyes. Now tell me whether I'm

pushing this toe up or down."

"Up," he had said.

"And now?"

"Down. No, up. I think it's up."

It was peculiar that a neuro-surgeon should want to play with his toes.

"Did I get them all right, doctor?"

"You did very well."

But that was a year ago. He had felt pretty good a year ago. The sort of things that happened now never used to happen then. Take, for example, just one item--the bathroom tap.

Why was the hot tap in the bathroom on a different side this morning? That was a new one.

It is not of the least importance, you understand, but it would be interesting to know why.

Do you think she could have changed it over, taken a spanner and a pipe-wrench and sneaked in during the night and changed it over?

Do you? Well--if you really want to know--yes. The way she'd been acting lately, she'd be quite capable of doing that.

A strange and difficult woman, that's what she was. Mind you, she used not to be, but there's no doubt at all that right now she was as strange and difficult as they come. Especially at night.

Yes, at night. That was the worst time of all--the night.

Why, when he put out his right hand in bed at night, could his fingers not feel what they were touching? He had knocked over the lamp and she had woken up and then sat up suddenly while he was feeling for it on the floor in the dark.

"What are you doing now?"

"I knocked over the lamp. I'm sorry."

"Oh Christ," she had said. "Yesterday it was the glass of water. What's the matter with you?"

Once, the doctor had stroked the back of his hand with a feather, and he hadn't been able to feel that either. But he had felt it when the man scratched him with a pin.

"Shut your eyes. No--you mustn't look. Shut them tight. Now tell me if this is hot or cold."

"Hot." „ And this?"

"Cold."

"And this?"

"Cold. I mean hot. Yes, it's hot, isn't it?"

"That's right," the doctor had said. "You did very well."

But that was a year ago.

Why were the switches on the walls, just lately, always a few inches aw

ay from the well-remembered places when he felt for them in the dark?

Don't think about it, he told himself. The only thing is not to think about it

And while we're on the subject, why did the walls of the living-room take on a slightly different shade of colour each day?

Green and blue-green and blue; and sometimes--sometimes slowly swimming like colours seen through the heat-haze of a brazier.

One by one, neatly, like index cards out of a machine, the little questions dropped.

Whose face appeared for one second at the window during dinner? Whose eyes?

"What are you staring at?"

"Nothing," he had answered. "But it would be nice if we could draw the curtains, don't you think?"

"Robert, what were you staring at?"

"Nothing,"

"Why were you staring at the window like that?"

"It would be nice if we could draw the curtains, don't you think?" he had answered.

He was going past the place where he had heard the horse in the field and now he could hear it again; the breathing, the soft hoof thuds, and the crunch of grass-cropping that was like the noise of a man munching celery.

"Hello old horse," he said, calling loud into the darkness. "Hello old horse over there."

Suddenly he heard the footsteps behind him, slow, long-striding footsteps close behind, and he stopped. The footsteps stopped. He turned around, searching the darkness.

"Good evening," he said, "You here again?"

In the quiet that followed he could hear the wind moving the leaves in the hedge.

"Are you going my way?" he said.

Then he turned and walked on, the dog still pulling ahead, and the footsteps started after him again, but more softly now, as though the person were walking on toes.

He stopped and turned again.

"I can't see you," he said, "because it's so dark. Are you someone I know?"

Again the silence, and the cool summer wind on his cheeks, and the dog tugging on the leash to get home.

"All right," he called. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. But remember I know you're there."

Someone trying to be clever.

Far away in the night, over to the west and very high, he heard the faint hum of an aeroplane. He stopped again, head up, listening.

"Miles away," he said. "Won't come near here." But why, when one of them flew over the house, did everything inside him come to a stop, and his talking and what he was doing, while he sat or stood in a sort of paralysis waiting for the whistle-shriek of the bomb. That one after dinner this evening.

"Why did you duck like that?" she asked, "Duck?"

"Why did you duck? What are you ducking for?"

"Duck?" he had said again. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'll say you don't," she had answered, staring at him hard with those hard, blue-white eyes, the lids dropping slightly, as always when there was contempt. The drop of her eyelids was something beautiful to him, the half-closed eyes and the way the lids dropped and the eyes became hooded when her contempt was extreme.

Yesterday, lying in bed in the early morning, when the noise of gunfire was just beginning far away down the valley, he had reached out with his left hand and touched her body for a little comfort.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Nothing, dear."

"You woke me up." m sorry."

It would be a help if she would only let him lie closer to her in the early mornings when he began to hear the noise of gunfire.

He would soon be home now. Around the last bend of the lane he could see a light glowing pink through the curtain of the living-room window, and he hurried forward to the gate and through it and up the path to the front door, the dog still pulling ahead.

He stood on the porch, feeling around for the door-knob in the dark.

It was on the right when he went out. He distinctly remembered it being on the right-hand side when he shut the door half an hour ago and went out.

It couldn't be that she had changed that over too? Just to fox him? Taken a bag of tools and quickly changed it over to the other side while he was out walking the dog?

He moved his hand over to the left--and the moment the fingers touched the knob, something small but violent exploded inside his head and with it a surge of fury and outrage and fear. He opened the door, shut it quickly behind him and shouted "Edna, are you there?"

There was no answer so he shouted again, and this time she heard him.

"What do you want now? You woke me up."

"Come down here a moment, will you. I want to talk to you."

"Oh for heaven's sake," she answered. "Be quiet and come on up."

"Come here!" he shouted. "Come here at once!"

"I'll be damned if I will. You come here."

The man paused, head back, looking up the stairs into the dark of the second floor. He could see where the stair-rail curved to the left and went on up out of sight in the black towards the landing and if you went straight on across the landing you came to the bedroom, and it would be black in there too.

"Edna!" he shouted. "Edna!"

"Oh go to hell."

He began to move slowly up the stairs, treading quietly, touching the stair-rail for guidance, up and around the lefthand curve into the dark above. At the top he took an extra step that wasn't there; but he was ready for it and there was no noise. He paused awhile then, listening, and he wasn't sure, but he thought he could hear the guns starting up again far away down the valley, heavy stuff mostly, seventy-fives and maybe a couple of mortars somewhere in the background.

Across the landing now and through the open doorway--which was easy in the dark because he knew it so well--through on to the bedroom carpet that was thick and soft and pale grey although he could not feel or see it.

In the centre of the room he waited, listening for sounds. She had gone back to sleep and was breathing rather loud, making the slightest little whistle with the air between her teeth each time she exhaled. The curtain flapped gently against the open window, the alarm-clock tick-tick-ticked beside the bed.

Now that his eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark he could just make out the end of the bed, the white blanket tucked in under the mattress, the bulge of her feet under the bedclothes; and then, as though aware of the presence of the man in the room, the woman stirred. He heard her turn, and turn again. The sound of her breathing stopped. There was a succession of little movement-noises and once the bedsprings creaked, loud as a shout in the dark.

"Is that you, Robert?"

He made no move, no sound.

"Robert, are you there?"

The voice was strange and rather unpleasant to him.

"Robert!" She was wide awake now. "Where are you?"

Where had he heard that voice before? It had a quality of stridence, dissonance, like two single high notes struck together hard in discord. Also there was an inability to pronounce the R of Robert. Who was it that used to say Wobert to him?

"Wobert," she said again. "What are you doing?"

Was it that nurse in the hospital, the tall one with fair hair? No, it was further back. Such an awful voice as that he ought to remember. Give him a little time and he would get the name.

At that moment he heard the snap of the switch of the bedside lamp and in the flood of light he saw the woman half-sitting up in bed, dressed in some sort of a pink nightdress. There was a surprised, wide-eyed expression on her face. Her cheeks and chin were oily with cold cream.

"You better put that thing down," she was saying, "before you cut yourself."

"Where's Edna?" He was staring at her hard.

The woman, half-sitting up in bed, watched him carefully. He was standing at the foot of the bed, a huge, broad man, standing motionless, erect, with heels together, almost at attention, dressed in his dark-brown, woolly, heavy suit.

"Go on," she ordered. "Put it down."

"Where's Edna?"

"What's the matter with you, Wobert?"

"There's nothing the matter with me. I'm just asking you where's my wife?"

The woman was easing herself up gradually into an erect sitting position and sliding her legs towards the edge of the bed. "Well," she said at length, the voice changing, the hard blue-white eyes secret and cunning, "if you really want to know, Edna's gone. She left just now while you were out."

"Where did she go?"

"She didn't say."

"And who are you?"

"I'm just a friend of hers."

"You don't have to shout at me," he said. "What's all the excitement?"

"I simply want you to know I'm not Edna."

The man considered this a moment, then he said, "How did you know my name?"

"Edna told me." slightly he paused, studying her closely, still slightly puzzled, but much calmer now, his eyes calm, perhaps even a little amused the way they looked at her. "I think I prefer Edna."

In the silence that followed they neither of them moved. The woman was very tense, sitting up straight with her arms tense on either side of her and slightly bent at the elbows, the hands pressing palms downward on the mattress.

"I love Edna, you know. Did she ever tell you I love her?"

The woman didn't answer.

"I think she's a bitch. But it's a funny thing I love her just the same."

The woman was not looking at the man's face; she was watching his right hand.

"Awful cruel little bitch, Edna."

And a long silence now, the man standing erect, motionless, the woman s

itting motionless in the bed, and it was so quiet suddenly that through the open window they could hear the water in the millstream going over the dam far down the valley on the next farm.

Then the man again, speaking calmly, slowly, quite impersonally: "As a matter of fact, I don't think she even likes me any more."

The woman shifted closer to the edge of the bed. "Put that knife down," she said, "before you cut yourself."

"Don't shout, please. Can't you talk nicely?" Now, suddenly, the man leaned forward, staring intently into the woman's face, and he raised his eyebrows. "That's strange," he said. "That's very strange."

He took a step forward, his knees touching the bed. "You look a bit like Edna yourself."

"Edna's gone out. I told you that."

He continued to stare at her and the woman kept quite still, the palms of her hands pressing deep into the mattress.

"Well," he said. "I wonder."

"I told you Edna's gone out. I'm a friend of hers. My name is Mary."

"My wife," the man said, "has a funny little brown mole just behind her left ear. You don't have that, do you?"

"I certainly don't."

"Turn your head and let me look."

"I told you I didn't have it."

"Just the same, I'd like to make sure."

The man came slowly around the end of the bed. "Stay where you are," he said. "Please don't move." And he came towards her slowly, watching her all the time, a little smile touching the corners of his mouth.

The woman waited until he was within reach, and then, with a quick right hand, so quick he never saw it coming, she smacked him hard across the front of the face. And when he sat down on the bed and began to cry, she took the knife from his hand and went swiftly out of the room, down the stairs to the hall, where the telephone was.

My Lady Love, My Dove

IT has been my habit for many years to take a nap after lunch. I settle myself in a chair in the living-room with a cushion behind my head and my feet up on a small square leather stool, and I read until I drop off.

On this Friday afternoon, I was in my chair and feeling as comfortable as ever with a book in my hands--an old favourite, Doubleday and Westwood's *The Genera of Diurnal Lepidoptera*--when my wife, who has never been a s

ilent lady, began to talk to me from the sofa opposite. "These two people," she said, "what time are they coming?"

I made no answer, so she repeated the question, louder this time.

I told her politely that I didn't know.

"I don't think I like them very much," she said. "Especially him."

"No dear, all right."

"Arthur. I said I don't think I like them very much."

I lowered my book and looked across at her lying with her feet up on the sofa, flipping over the pages of some fashion magazine. "We've only met them once," I said.

"A dreadful man, really. Never stopped telling jokes, or stories, or something."

"I'm sure you'll manage them very well, dear."

"And she's pretty frightful, too. When do you think they'll arrive?"

Somewhere around six o'clock, I guessed.

"But don't you think they're awful?" she asked, pointing at me with her finger.

"Well.

"They're too awful, they really are."

"We can hardly put them off now, Pamela."

"They're absolutely the end," she said.

"Then why did you ask them?" The question slipped out before I could stop myself and I regretted it at once, for it is a rule with me never to provoke my wife if I can help it. There was a pause, and I watched her face, waiting for the answer--the big white face that to me was something so strange and fascinating there were occasions when I could hardly bring myself to look away from it. In the evenings sometimes working on her embroidery, or painting those small intricate flower pictures--the face would tighten and glimmer with a subtle inward strength that was beautiful beyond words, and I would sit and stare at it minute after minute while pretending to read. Even now, at this moment, with that compressed acid look, the frowning forehead, the petulant curl of the nose, I had to admit that there was a majestic quality about this woman, something splendid, almost stately; and so tall she was, far taller than I--although today, in her fifty-first year, I think one would have to call her big rather than tall.

"You know very well why I asked them," she answered sharply. "For bridge, that's all. They play an absolutely first-class game, and for a decent stake." She glanced up and saw me watching her. "Well," she said, "that's about the way you feel too, isn't it?"

"Well, of course, I.

"Don't be a fool, Arthur."

"The only time I met them I must say they did seem quite nice."

"So is the butcher."

"Now Pamela, dear--please. We don't want any of that."

"Listen," she said, slapping down the magazine on her lap, "you saw the sort of people they were as well as I did. A pair of stupid climbers who think they can go anywhere just because they play good bridge."

"I'm sure you're right dear, but what I don't honestly understand is why--"

"I keep telling you--so that for once we can get a decent game. I'm sick and tired of playing with rabbits. But I really can't see why I should have these awful people in the house."

"Of course not, my dear, but isn't it a little late now-- "Arthur?"

"Yes?"

"Why for God's sake do you always argue with me. You know you dislike them as much as I did."

"I really don't think you need worry, Pamela. After all, they seemed quite a nice well-mannered young couple."

"Arthur, don't be pompous." She was looking at me hard with those wide grey eyes of hers, and to avoid them--they sometimes made me quite uncomfortable I got up and walked over to the french windows that led into the garden.

The big sloping lawn out in front of the house was newly mown, striped with pale and dark ribbons of green. On the far side, the two laburnums were in full flower at last, the long golden chains making a blaze of colour against the darker trees beyond. The roses were out too, and the scarlet begonias, and in the long herbaceous border all my lovely hybrid lupins, columbine, delphinium, sweet-william, and the huge pale, scented iris. One of the gardeners was coming up the drive from his lunch. I could see the roof of his cottage through the trees, and beyond it to one side, the place where the drive went out through the iron gates on the Canterbury road.

My wife's house. Her garden. How beautiful it all was! How peaceful! Now, if only Pamela would try to be a little less solicitous of my welfare, less prone to coax me into doing things for my own good rather than for my own pleasure, then everything would be heaven. Mind you, I don't want to give the impression that I do not love her--I worship the very air she breathes--or that I can't manage her, or that I am not the captain of my ship. All I am trying to say is that she can be a trifle irritating at times, the way she carries on. For example, those little mannerisms of hers--I do wish she would drop them all, especially the way she has of pointing a finger at me to emphasize a phrase. You must remember that I am a man who is built rather small, and a gesture like this, when used to excess by a person like my wife, is apt to intimidate. I sometimes find it difficult to convince myself that she is not an overbearing woman.

"Arthur!" she called. "Come here."

"What?"

"I've just had a most marvellous idea. Come here."

I turned and went over to where she was lying on the sofa.

"Look," she said, "do you want to have some fun?"

"What sort of fun?"

"With the Snapes?"

"Who are the Snapes?"

"Come on," she said. "Wake up. Henry and Sally Snape. Our weekend guests."

"Well?"

"Now listen. I was lying here thinking how awful they really are... the way they behave with him with his jokes and her like a sort of love-crazed sparrow. .." She hesitated, smiling slyly, and for some reason, I got the impression she was about to say a shocking thing. "Well--if that's the way they behave when they're in front of us, then what on earth must they be like when they're alone together?"

"Now wait a minute, Pamela-- "Don't be an ass, Arthur. Let's have some fun--some real fun for once--tonight." She had half raised herself up off the sofa, her face bright with a kind of sudden recklessness, the mouth slightly open, and she was looking at me with two round grey eyes, a spark dancing slowly in each.

"Why shouldn't we?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Why, it's obvious. Can't you see?"

"No I can't."

"All we've got to do is put a microphone in their room." I admit I was expecting something pretty bad, but when she said this I was so shocked I didn't know what to answer.

"That's exactly what we'll do," she said.

"Here!" I cried. "No. Wait a minute. You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"That's about the nastiest trick I ever heard of. It's like--why, it's like listening at keyholes, or reading letters, only far far worse. You don't mean this seriously, do you?"

"Of course I do."

I knew how much she disliked being contradicted, but there were times when I felt it necessary to assert myself, even at considerable risk. "Pamela," I said, snapping the words out, "I forbid you to do it!"

She took her feet down from the sofa and sat up straight. "What in God's name are you trying to pretend to be, Arthur? I simply don't understand you."

"That shouldn't be too difficult."

"Tommyrot! I've known you do lots of worse things than this before now."

"Never!"

"Oh yes I have. What makes you suddenly think you're a so much nicer person than I am?"

"I've never done things like that."

"All right, my boy," she said, pointing her finger at me like a pistol.

"What about that time at the Milfords' last Christmas? Remember? You nearly laughed your head off and I had to put my hand over your mouth to stop them hearing us. What about that for one?"

"That was different," I said. "It wasn't our house. And they weren't our guests."

"It doesn't make any difference at all." She was sitting very upright, staring at me with those round grey eyes, and the chin was beginning to come up high in a peculiarly contemptuous manner. "Don't be such a pompous hypocrite," she said. "What on earth's come over you?"

"I really think it's a pretty nasty thing, you know, Pamela. I honestly do."

"But listen, Arthur. I'm a nasty person. And so are you in a secret sort of way. That's why we get along together."

"I never heard such nonsense."

"Mind you, if you've suddenly decided to change your character completely, that's another story."

"You've got to stop talking this way, Pamela."

"You see," she said, "if you really have decided to reform, then what on earth am I going to do?"

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Arthur, how could a nice person like you want to associate with a stinker?"

I sat myself down slowly in the chair opposite her, and she was watching me all the time. You understand, she was a big woman, with a big white face, and when she looked at me hard, as she was doing now, I became--how shall I say it--surrounded, almost enveloped by her, as though she were a great tub of cream and I had fallen in.

"You don't honestly want to do this microphone thing, do you?"

"But of course I do. It's time we had a bit of fun around here. Come on, Arthur. Don't be so stuffy."

"It's not right, Pamela."

"It's just as right"--up came the finger again--"just as right as when you found those letters of Mary Probert's in her purse and you read them through from beginning to end."

"We should never have done that."

"We!"

"You read them afterwards, Pamela."

"It didn't harm anyone at all. You said so yourself at the time. And this one's no worse."

"How would you like it if someone did it to you?"

"How could I mind if I didn't know it was being done? Come on, Arthur. Don't be so flabby."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Maybe the great radio engineer doesn't know how to connect the mike to the speaker?"

"That's the easiest part."

"Well, go on then. Go on and do it."

"I'll think about it and let you know later."

"There's no time for that. They might arrive any moment."

"Then I won't do it. I'm not going to be caught red-handed."

"If they come before you're through. I'll simply keep them down here. No danger. What's the time, anyway?"

It was nearly three o'clock.

"They're driving down from London," she said, "and they certainly won't leave till after lunch. That gives you plenty of time."

"Which room are you putting them in?"

"The big yellow room at the end of the corridor. That's not too far away, is it?"

"I suppose it could be done."

"And by the by," she said, "where are you going to have the speaker?"

"I haven't said I'm going to do it yet."

"My God!" she cried, "I'd like to see someone try and stop you now. You ought to see your face. It's all pink and excited at the very prospect. Put the speaker in our bedroom why not? But go on and hurry."

I hesitated. It was something I made a point of doing whenever she tried to order me about, instead of asking nicely. "I don't like it, Pamela."

She didn't say any more after that; she just sat there, absolutely still, watching me, a resigned, waiting expression on her face, as though she were in a long queue. This, I knew from experience, was a danger signal. She was like one of those bomb things with the pin pulled out, and it was only a matter of time before--bang! and she would explode. In the silence that followed, I could almost hear her ticking.

So I got up quietly and went out to the workshop and collected a mike and a hundred and fifty feet of wire. Now that I was away from her, I am ashamed to admit that I began to feel a bit of excitement myself, a tiny warm prickling sensation under the skin, near the tips of my fingers. It was nothing much, mind you--really nothing at all. Good heavens, I experience the same thing every morning of my life when I open the paper to check the closing pr

ices on two or three of my wife's larger stockholdings. So I wasn't going to get carried away by a silly joke like this. At the same time, I couldn't help being amused.

I took the stairs two at a time and entered the yellow room at the end of the passage. It had the clean, un-lived-in appearance of all guest rooms, with its twin beds, yellow satin bedspreads, pale-yellow walls, and golden-colored curtains. I began to look around for a good place to hide the mike. This was the most important part of all, for whatever happened, it must not be discovered. I thought first of the basket of logs by the fireplace. Put it under the logs. No--not safe enough. Behind the radiator? On top of the wardrobe? Under the desk? None of these seemed very professional to me. All might be subject to chance inspection because of a dropped collar stud or something like that. Finally, with considerable cunning, I decided to put it inside the springing of the sofa. The sofa was against the wall, near the edge of the carpet, and my lead wire could go straight under the carpet over to the door.

I tipped up the sofa and slit the material underneath. Then I tied the microphone securely up among the springs, making sure that it faced the room. After that, I led the wire under the carpet to the door. I was calm and cautious in everything I did. Where the wire had to emerge from under the carpet and pass out of the door, I made a little groove in the wood so that it was almost invisible.

All this, of course, took time, and when I suddenly heard the crunch of wheels on the gravel of the drive outside, and then the slamming of car doors and the voices of our guests, I was still only half-way down the corridor tacking the wire along the skirting. I stopped and straightened up, hammer in hand, and I must confess that I felt afraid. You have no idea how unnerving that noise was to me. I experienced the same sudden stomachy feeling of fright as when a bomb once dropped the other side of the village during the war, one afternoon, while I was working quietly in the library with my butterflies.

Don't worry, I told myself. Pamela will take care of these people. She won't let them come up here.

Rather frantically, I set about finishing the job, and soon I had the wire tacked all along the corridor and through into our bedroom. Here, concealment was not so important, although I still did not permit myself to get careless because of the servants. So I laid the wire under the carpet and brought it up unobtrusively into the back of the radio. Making the final connections was an elementary technical matter and took me no time at all.

Well--I had done it. I stepped back and glanced at the little radio. Somehow, now, it looked different--no longer a silly box for making noises but an evil little creature that crouched on the table top with a part of its own body reaching out secretly into a forbidden place far away. I switched it on.

It hummed faintly but made no other sound. I took my bedside clock, which had a loud tick, and carried it along to the yellow room and placed it on the floor by the sofa. When I returned, sure enough the radio creature was ticking away as loudly as if the clock were in the room--even louder.

I fetched back the clock. Then I tidied myself up in the bathroom, returned my tools to the workshop, and prepared to meet the guests. But first, to compose myself, and so that I would not have to appear in front of them with the blood, as it were, still wet on my hands, I spent five minutes in the library with my collection. I concentrated on a tray of the lovely Vanessa cardui--the 'painted lady'--and made a few notes for a paper I was preparing entitled 'The Relation between Colour Pattern and Framework of Wings', which I intended to read at the next meeting of our society in Canterbury. In this way I soon regained my normal grave, attentive manner.

When I entered the living-room, our two guests, whose names I could never remember, were seated on the sofa. My wife was mixing drinks.

"Oh, there you are, Arthur," she said. "Where have you been?"

I thought this was an unnecessary remark. "I'm so sorry," I said to the guests as we shook hands. "I was busy and forgot the time."

"We all know what you've been doing," the girl said, smiling wisely. "But we'll forgive him, won't we, dearest?"

"I think we should," the husband answered.

I had a frightful, fantastic vision of my wife telling them, amidst roars of laughter, precisely what I had been doing upstairs. She couldn't--she couldn't have done that! I looked round at her and she too was smiling as she measured out the gin.

"I'm sorry we disturbed you," the girl said.

I decided that if this was going to be a joke then I'd better join in quickly, so I forced myself to smile with her.

"You must let us see it," the girl continued.

"See what?"

"Your collection. Your wife says that they are absolutely beautiful."

I lowered myself slowly into a chair and relaxed. It was ridiculous to be so nervous and jumpy. "Are you interested in butterflies?" I asked her.

"I'd love to see yours, Mr Beauchamp."

The Martinis were distributed and we settled down to a couple of hours of talk and drink before dinner. It was from then on that I began to form the impression that our guests were a charming couple. My wife, coming from a titled family, is apt to be conscious of her class and breeding, and is often hasty in her judgement of strangers who are friendly towards her--particularly tall men. She is frequently right, but in this case I felt that she might be making a mistake. As a rule, I myself do not like tall men either; they are apt to be supercilious and omniscient. But Henry Snape--my wife

had whispered his name--struck me as being an amiable simple young man with good manners whose main preoccupation, very properly, was Mrs Snape. He was handsome in a long-faced, horsy sort of way, with dark-brown eyes that seemed to be gentle and sympathetic. I envied him his fine mop of black hair, and caught myself wondering what lotion he used to keep it looking so healthy. He did tell us one or two jokes, but they were on a high level and no one could have objected.

"At school," he said, "they used to call me S cervix. Do you know why?"

"I haven't the least idea," my wife answered.

"Because cervix is Latin for nape."

This was rather deep and it took me a while to work out.

"What school was that, Mr Snape?" my wife asked.

"Eton," he said, and my wife gave a quick little nod of approval. Now she will talk to him, I thought, so I turned my attention to the other One, Sally Snape. She was an attractive girl with a bosom. Had I met her fifteen years earlier I might well have got myself into some sort of trouble. As it was, I had a pleasant enough time telling her all about my beautiful butterflies. I was observing her closely as I talked, and after a while I began to get the impression that she was not, in fact, quite so merry and smiling a girl as I had been led to believe at first. She seemed to be coiled in herself, as though with a secret she was jealously guarding. The deep-blue eyes moved too quickly about the room, never settling or resting on one thing for more than a moment; and over all her face, though so faint that they might not even have been there, those small downward lines of sorrow.

"I'm so looking forward to our game of bridge," I said, finally changing the subject.

"Us too," she answered. "You know we play almost every night, we love it so."

"You are extremely expert, both of you How did you get to be so good?"

"It's practice," she said. "That's all. Practice, practice, practice."

"Have you played in any championships?"

"Not yet, but Henry wants very much for us to do that. It's hard work, you know, to reach that standard. Terribly hard work." Was there not here, I wondered, a hint of resignation in her voice? Yes, that was probably it; he was pushing her too hard, making her take it too seriously, and the poor girl was tired of it all.

At eight o'clock, without changing, we moved in to dinner. The meal went well, with Henry Snape telling us some very droll stories. He also praised my Richebourg '34 in a most knowledgeable fashion, which pleased me greatly. By the time coffee came, I realized that I had grown to like these two youngsters immensely, and as a result I began to feel uncomfortable about this microphone business. It would have been all right if they had been horr

id people, but to play this trick on two such charming young persons as the
se filled me with a strong sense of guilt. Don't misunderstand me. I was no
t getting cold feet. It didn't seem necessary to stop the operation. But I
refused to relish the prospect openly as my wife seemed now to be doing, wi
th covert smiles and winks and secret little noddings of the head.

Around nine-thirty, feeling comfortable and well fed, we returned to the
large living-room to start our bridge. We were playing for a fair stake--te
n shillings a hundred--so we decided not to split families, and I partnered
my wife the whole time. We all four of us took the game seriously, which is
the only way to take it, and we played silently, intently, hardly speaking a
t all except to bid. It was not the money we played for. Heaven knows, my wi
fe had enough of that, and so apparently did the Snapes. But among experts i
t is almost traditional that they play for a reasonable stake.

That night the cards were evenly divided, but for once my wife played ba
dly, so we got the worst of it. I could see that she wasn't concentrating fu
lly, and as we came along towards midnight she began not even to care. She k
ept glancing up at me with those large grey eyes of hers, the eyebrows raise
d, the nostrils curiously open, a little gloating smile around the corner of
her mouth.

Our opponents played a fine game. Their bidding was masterly, and all t
hrough the evening they made only one mistake. That was when the girl badly
overestimated her partner's hand and bid six spades. I doubled and they we
nt three down, vulnerable, which cost them eight hundred points. It was jus
t a momentary lapse, but I remember that Sally Snape was very put out by it
, even though her husband forgave her at once, kissing her hand across the
table and telling her not to worry.

Around twelve-thirty my wife announced that she wanted to go to bed.

"Just one more rubber?" Henry Snape said.

"No, Mr Snape. I'm tired tonight. Arthur's tired, too. I can see it. Let's all
go to bed."

She herded us out of the room and we went upstairs, the four of us toget
her. On the way up, there was the usual talk about breakfast and what they w
anted and how they were to call the maid. "I think you'll like your room," m
y wife said. "It has a view right across the valley, and the sun comes to yo
u in the morning around ten o'clock."

We were in the passage now, standing outside our own bedroom door, and
I could see the wire I had put down that afternoon and how it ran along the
top of the skirting down to their room. Although it was nearly the same co
lour as the paint, it looked very conspicuous to me. "Sleep well," my wife
said. "Sleep well, Mrs Snape. Good night, Mr Snape." I followed her into ou
r room and shut the door.

"Quick!" she cried. "Turn it on!" My wife was always like that, frighten

ed that she was going to miss something. She had a reputation, when she went hunting--I never go myself--of always being right up with the hounds whatever the cost to herself or her horse for fear that she might miss a kill. I could see she had no intention of missing this one.

The little radio warmed up just in time to catch the noise of their door opening and closing again.

"There!" my wife said. "They've gone in." She was standing in the centre of the room in her blue dress, her hands clasped before her, her head craned forward, intently listening, and the whole of the big white face seemed somehow to have gathered itself together, tight like a wine-skin.

Almost at once the voice of Henry Snape came out of the radio, strong and clear. "You're just a goddam little fool," he was saying, and this voice was so different from the one I remembered, so harsh and unpleasant, it made me jump. "The whole bloody evening wasted! Eight hundred points--that's eight pounds between us!"

"I got mixed up," the girl answered. "I won't do it again, I promise."

"What's this?" my wife said. "What's going on?" Her mouth was wide open now, the eyebrows stretched up high, and she came quickly over to the radio and leaned forward, ear to the speaker. I must say I felt rather excited myself. "I promise, I promise I won't do it again," the girl was saying.

"We're not taking any chances," the man answered grimly. "We're going to have another practice right now."

"Oh no, please! I couldn't stand it!"

"Look," the man said, "all the way out here to take money off this rich bitch and you have to go and mess it up."

My wife's turn to jump.

"The second time this week," he went on.

"I promise I won't do it again."

"Sit down. I'll sing them out and you answer."

"No, Henry, please! Not all five hundred of them. It'll take three hours."

"All right, then. We'll leave out the finger positions. I think you're sure of those. We'll just do the basic bids showing honour tricks."

"Oh, Henry, must we? I'm so tired."

"It's absolutely essential that you get them perfect," he said. "We have a game every day next week, you know that. And we've got to eat."

"What is this?" my wife whispered. "What on earth is it?"

"Shhh!" I said. "Listen!"

"All right," the man's voice was saying. "Now we'll start from the beginning. Ready?"

"Oh Henry, please!" She sounded very near to tears.

"Come on, Sally. Pull yourself together."

Then, in a quite different voice, the one we had been used to hearing in

the living-room, Henry Snape said, "One club." I noticed that there was a curious lilting emphasis on the word 'one', the first part of the word drawn out long.

"Ace queen of clubs," the girl replied wearily. "King jack of spades. No hearts, and ace jack of diamonds."

"And how many cards to each suit? Watch my finger positions carefully."

"You said we could miss those."

"Well--if you're quite sure you know them?"

"Yes, I know them."

A pause, then "A club."

"King jack of clubs," the girl recited. "Ace of spades. Queen jack of hearts, and ace queen of diamonds."

Another pause, then "I'll say one club."

"Ace king of clubs.."

"My heavens alive!" I cried. "It's a bidding code! They show every card in the hand!"

"Arthur, it couldn't be!"

"It's like those men who go into the audience and borrow something from you and there's a girl blindfold on the stage, and from the way he phrases the question she can tell him exactly what it is--even a railway ticket, and what station it's from."

"It's impossible!"

"Not at all. But it's tremendous hard work to learn. Listen to them."

"I'll go one heart," the man's voice was saying.

"King queen ten of hearts. Ace jack of spades. No diamonds. Queen jack of clubs." "And you see," I said, "he tells her the number of cards he has in each suit by the position of his fingers."

"How?"

"I don't know. You heard him saying about it., "My God, Arthur! Are you sure that's what they're doing?"

"I'm afraid so." I watched her as she walked quickly over to the side of the bed to fetch a cigarette. She lit it with her back to me and then swung round, blowing the smoke up at the ceiling in a thin stream. I knew we were going to have to do something about this, but I wasn't quite sure what because we couldn't possibly accuse them without revealing the source of our information. I waited for my wife's decision.

"Why, Arthur," she said slowly, blowing out clouds of smoke. "Why, this is a marvellous idea. D'you think we could learn to do it?"

"What!"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Here! No! Wait a minute, Pamela..." but she came swiftly across the ro

om, right up close to me where I was standing, and she dropped her head and looked down at me--the old look of a smile that wasn't a smile, at the corners of the mouth, and the curl of the nose, and the big full grey eyes staring at me with their bright black centres, and then they were grey, and all the rest was white flecked with hundreds of tiny red veins--and when she looked at me like this, hard and close, I swear to you it made me feel as though I were drowning. "Yes," she said. "Why not?"

"But Pamela... Good heavens... No... After all..."

"Arthur, I do wish you wouldn't argue with me all the time. That's exactly what we'll do. Now, go fetch a deck of cards; we'll start right away."

Dip in the Pool

ON the morning of the third day, the sea calmed. Even the most delicate passengers--those who had not been seen around the ship since sailing time--emerged from their cabins and crept on to the sun deck where the deck steward gave them chairs and tucked rugs around their legs and left them lying in rows, their faces upturned to the pale, almost heatless January sun.

It had been moderately rough the first two days, and this sudden calm and the sense of comfort that it brought created a more genial atmosphere over the whole ship. By the time evening came, the passengers, with twelve hours of good weather behind them, were beginning to feel confident, and at eight o'clock that night the main dining-room was filled with people eating and drinking with the assured, complacent air of seasoned sailors.

The meal was not half over when the passengers became aware, by the slight friction between their bodies and the seats of their chairs, that the big ship had actually started rolling again. It was very gentle at first, just a slow, lazy leaning to one side, then to the other, but it was enough to cause a subtle, immediate change of mood over the whole room. A few of the passengers glanced up from their food, hesitating, waiting, almost listening for the next roll, smiling nervously, little secret glimmers of apprehension in their eyes. Some were completely unruffled, somewhat openly smug, a number of the smug ones making jokes about food and weather in order to torture the few who were beginning to suffer. The movement of the ship then became rapidly more and more violent, and only five or six minutes after the first roll had been noticed, she was swinging heavily from side to side, the passengers bracing themselves in their chairs, leaning against the pull as in a car cornering.

At last the really bad roll came, and Mr William Botibol, sitting at the purser's table, saw his plate of poached turbot with hollandaise sauce slid

ing suddenly away from under his fork. There was a flutter of excitement, everybody reaching for plates and wineglasses. Mrs Renshaw, seated at the purser's right, gave a little scream and clutched that gentleman's arm.

"Going to be a dirty night," the purser said, looking at Mrs Renshaw. "I think it's blowing up for a very dirty night." There was just the faintest suggestion of relish in the way the purser said this.

A steward came hurrying up and sprinkled water on the table cloth between the plates. The excitement subsided. Most of the passengers continued with their meal. A small number, including Mrs Renshaw, got carefully to their feet and threaded their ways with a kind of concealed haste between the tables and through the doorway.

"Well," the purser said, "there she goes." He glanced around with approval at the remainder of his flock who were sitting quiet, looking complacent, their faces reflecting openly that extraordinary pride that travellers seem to take in being recognized as 'good sailors'.

When the eating was finished and the coffee had been served, Mr Botibol, who had been unusually grave and thoughtful since the rolling started, suddenly stood up and carried his cup of coffee around to Mrs Renshaw's vacant place, next to the purser. He seated himself in the chair, then immediately leaned over and began to whisper urgently in the purser's ear. "Excuse me," he said, "but could you tell me something, please?"

The purser, small and fat and red, bent forward to listen. "What's the trouble, Mr Botibol?"

"What I want to know is this." The man's face was anxious and the purser was watching it. "What I want to know is will the captain already have made his estimate on the day's run--you know, for the auction pool? I mean before it began to get rough like this?"

The purser, who had prepared himself to receive a personal confidence, smiled and leaned back in his seat to relax his full belly. "I should say so--yes," he answered. He didn't bother to whisper his reply, although automatically he lowered his voice, as one does when answering a whisperer.

"About how long ago do you think he did it?"

"Some time this afternoon. He usually does it in the afternoon."

"About what time?"

"Oh, I don't know. Around four o'clock I should guess."

"Now tell me another thing. How does the captain decide which number it shall be? Does he take a lot of trouble over that?"

The purser looked at the anxious frowning face of Mr Botibol and he smiled, knowing quite well what the man was driving at. "Well, you see, the captain has a little conference with the navigating officer, and they study the weather and a lot of other things, and then they make their estimate."

Mr Botibol nodded, pondering this answer for a moment. Then he said,

"Do you think the captain knew there was bad weather coming today?"

"I couldn't tell you," the purser replied. He was looking into the small black eyes of the other man, seeing the two single little specks of excitement dancing in their centres. "I really couldn't tell you, Mr Botibol. I wouldn't know."

"If this gets any worse it might be worth buying some of the low numbers. What do you think?" The whispering was more urgent, more anxious now

"Perhaps it will," the purser said. "I doubt whether the old man allowed for a really rough night. It was pretty calm this afternoon when he made his estimate."

The others at the table had become silent and were trying to hear, watching the purser with that intent, half-cocked, listening look that you can see also at the race track when they are trying to overhear a trainer talking about his chance: the slightly open lips, the upstretched eyebrows, the head forward and cocked a little to one side--that desperately straining, halfhypnotized, listening look that comes to all of them when they are hearing something straight from the horse's mouth.

"Now suppose you were allowed to buy a number, which one would you choose today?" Mr Botibol whispered.

"I don't know what the range is yet," the purser patiently answered. "They don't announce the range till the auction starts after dinner. And I'm really not very good at it anyway. I'm only the purser, you know."

At that point Mr Botibol stood up. "Excuse me, all," he said, and he walked carefully away over the swaying floor between the other tables, and twice he had to catch hold of the back of a chair to steady himself against the ship's roll.

"The sun deck, please," he said to the elevator man.

The wind caught him full in the face as he stepped out on to the open deck. He staggered and grabbed hold of the rail and held on tight with both hands, and he stood there looking out over the darkening sea where the great waves were welling up high and white horses were riding against the wind with plumes of spray behind them as they went.

"Pretty bad out there, wasn't it, sir?" the elevator man said on the way down.

Mr Botibol was combing his hair back into place with a small red comb. "Do you think we've slackened speed at all on account of the weather?" he asked.

"Oh, my word yes, sir. We slackened off considerable since this started. You got to slacken off speed in weather like this or you'll be throwing the passengers all over the ship."

Down in the smoking-room people were already gathering for the auction.

They were grouping themselves politely around the various tables, the men a little stiff in their dinner jackets, a little pink and overshaven and stiff beside their cool white-armed women. Mr Botibol took a chair close to the auctioneer's table. He crossed his legs, folded his arms, and settled himself in his seat with the rather desperate air of a man who has made a tremendous decision and refuses to be frightened.

The pool, he was telling himself, would probably be around seven thousand dollars. That was almost exactly what it had been the last two days with the numbers selling for between three and four hundred apiece. Being a British ship they did it in pounds, but he liked to do his thinking in his own currency. Seven thousand dollars was plenty of money. My goodness, yes! And what he would do, he would get them to pay him in hundred-dollar bills and he would take it ashore in the inside pocket of his jacket. No problem there. And right away, yes right away, he would buy a Lincoln convertible. He would pick it up on the way from the ship and drive it home just for the pleasure of seeing Ethel's face when she came out the front door and looked at it. Wouldn't that be something, to see Ethel's face when he glided up to the door in a brand-new pale-green Lincoln convertible! Hello, Ethel, honey, he would say, speaking very casual. I just thought I'd get you a little present. I saw it in the window as I went by, so I thought of you and how you were always wanting one. You like it, honey? he would say. You like the colour? And then he would watch her face.

The auctioneer was standing up behind his table now. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted. "The captain has estimated the day's run ending midday tomorrow, at five hundred and fifteen miles. As usual we will take the ten numbers on either side of it to make up the range. That makes it five hundred and five to five hundred and twenty-five. And of course for those who think the true figure will be still farther away, there'll be 'low field' and 'high field' sold separately as well. Now, we'll draw the first numbers out of the hat... here we are... five hundred and twelve?"

The room became quiet. The people sat still in their chairs, all eyes watching the auctioneer. There was a certain tension in the air, and as the bids got higher, the tension grew. This wasn't a game or a joke; you could be sure of that by the way one man would look across at another who had raised his bid--smiling perhaps, but only the lips smiling, the eyes bright and absolutely cold. Number five hundred and twelve was knocked down for one hundred and ten pounds. The next three or four numbers fetched roughly the same amount.

The ship was rolling heavily, and each time she went over, the wooden paneling on the walls creaked as if it were going to split. The passengers held on to the arms of their chairs, concentrating upon the auction.

"Low field!" the auctioneer called out. "The next number is low field."

Mr Botibol sat up very straight and tense. He would wait, he had decided, until the others had finished bidding, then he would jump in and make the last bid. He had figured that there must be at least five hundred dollars in his account at the bank at home, probably nearer six. That was about two hundred pounds--over two hundred. This ticket wouldn't fetch more than that.

"As you all know," the auctioneer was saying, "low field covers every number below the smallest number in the range, in this case every number below five hundred and five. So, if you think this ship is going to cover less than five hundred and five miles in the twenty-four hours ending at noon tomorrow, you better get in and buy this number. So what am I bid?"

It went clear up to one hundred and thirty pounds. Others beside Mr Botibol seemed to have noticed that the weather was rough. One hundred and forty... fifty... There it stopped. The auctioneer raised his hammer. "Going at one hundred and fifty.

"Sixty!" Mr Botibol called, and every face in the room turned and looked at him.

"Seventy!"

"Eighty!" Mr Botibol called.

"Ninety!"

"Two hundred!" Mr Botibol called. He wasn't stopping now--not for anyone.

There was a pause.

"Any advance on two hundred pounds?"

Sit still, he told himself. Sit absolutely still and don't look up. It's unlucky to look up. Hold your breath. No one's going to bid you up so long as you hold your breath.

"Going for two hundred pounds..." The auctioneer had a pink bald head and there were little beads of sweat sparkling on top of it. "Going..." Mr Botibol held his breath. "Going... Gone!" The man banged the hammer on the table. Mr Botibol wrote out a cheque and handed it to the auctioneer's assistant, then he settled back in his chair to wait for the finish. He did not want to go to bed before he knew how much there was in the pool.

They added it up after the last number had been sold and it came to twenty-one hundredodd pounds. That was around six thousand dollars. Ninety per cent to go to the winner, ten per cent to seamen's charities. Ninety per cent of six thousand was five thousand four hundred. Well---that was enough. He could buy the Lincoln convertible and there would be something left over, too. With this gratifying thought he went off, happy and excited, to his cabin.

When Mr Botibol awoke the next morning he lay quite still for several minutes with his eyes shut, listening for the sound of the gale, waiting for the roll of the ship. There was no sound of any gale and the ship was not roll

ling. He jumped up and peered out of the porthole. The sea Oh Jesus God---was smooth as glass, the great ship was moving through it fast, obviously making up for time lost during the night. Mr Botibol turned away and sat slowly down on the edge of his bunk. A fine electricity of fear was beginning to prick under the skin of his stomach. He hadn't a hope now. One of the higher numbers was certain to win it after this.

"Oh, my God," he said aloud. "What shall I do?"

What, for example, would Ethel say? It was simply not possible to tell her he had spent almost all of their two years' savings on a ticket in the ships pool. Nor was it possible to keep the matter secret. To do that he would have to tell her to stop drawing cheques. And what about the monthly instalments on the television set and the Encyclopaedia Britannica? Already he could see the anger and contempt in the woman's eyes, the blue becoming grey and the eyes themselves narrowing as they always did when there was anger in them.

"Oh, my God. What shall I do?"

There was no point in pretending that he had the slightest chance now--not unless the goddam ship started to go backwards. They'd have to put her in reverse and go full speed astern and keep right on going if he was to have any chance of winning it now. Well, maybe he should ask the captain to do just that. Offer him ten per cent of the profits. Offer him more if he wanted it. Mr Botibol started to giggle. Then very suddenly he stopped, his eyes and mouth both opening wide in a kind of shocked surprise. For it was at this moment that the idea came. It hit him hard and quick, and he jumped up from the bed, terribly excited, ran over to the porthole and looked out again. Well, he thought, why not? Why ever not? The sea was calm and he wouldn't have any trouble keeping afloat until they picked him up. He had a vague feeling that someone had done this thing before, but that didn't prevent him from doing it again. The ship would have to stop and lower a boat, and the boat would have to go back maybe half a mile to get him, and then it would have to return to the ship, the whole thing. An hour was about thirty miles. It would knock thirty miles off the day's run. That would do it. 'Low field' would be sure to win it then. Just so long as he made certain someone saw him falling over; but that would be simple to arrange. And he'd better wear light clothes, something easy to swim in. Sports clothes, that was it. He would dress as though he were going up to play some deck tennis just a shirt and a pair of shorts and tennis-shoes. And leave his watch behind. What was the time? Nine-fifteen. The sooner the better, then. Do it now and get it over with. Have to do it soon, because the time limit was midday.

Mr Botibol was both frightened and excited when he stepped out on to the sun deck in his sports clothes. His small body was wide at the hips, tapering upward to extremely narrow sloping shoulders, so that it resembled, in

shape at any rate, a bollard. His white skinny legs were covered with black hairs, and he came cautiously out on deck, treading softly in his tennis shoes. Nervously he looked around him. There was only one other person in sight, an elderly woman with very thick ankles and immense buttocks who was leaning over the rail staring at the sea. She was wearing a coat of Persian lamb and the collar was turned up so Mr Botibol couldn't see her face.

He stood still, examining her carefully from a distance. Yes, he told himself, she would probably do. She would probably give the alarm just as quickly as anyone else. But wait one minute, take your time, William Botibol, take your time. Remember what you told yourself a few minutes ago in the cabin when you were changing? You remember that?

The thought of leaping off a ship into the ocean a thousand miles from the nearest land had made Mr Botibol--a cautious man at the best of times--unusually advertent. He was by no means satisfied yet that this woman he saw before him was absolutely certain to give the alarm when he made his jump. In his opinion there were two possible reasons why she might fail him. Firstly, she might be deaf and blind. It was not very probable, but on the other hand it might be so, and why take a chance? All he had to do was check it by talking to her for a moment beforehand. Secondly--and this will demonstrate how suspicious the mind of a man can become when it is working through self-preservation and fear--secondly, it had occurred to him that the woman might herself be the owner of one of the high numbers in the pool and as such would have a sound financial reason for not wishing to stop the ship. Mr Botibol recalled that people had killed their fellows for far less than six thousand dollars. It was happening every day in the newspapers. So why take a chance on that either? Check on it first. Be sure of your facts. Find out about it by a little polite conversation. Then, provided that the woman appeared also to be a pleasant, kindly human being, the thing was a cinch and he could leap overboard with a light heart.

Mr Botibol advanced casually towards the woman and took up a position beside her, leaning on the rail. "Hullo," he said pleasantly.

She turned and smiled at him, a surprisingly lovely, almost a beautiful smile, although the face itself was very plain. "Hullo," she answered him.

Check, Mr Botibol told himself, on the first question. She is neither blind nor deaf. "Tell me," he said, coming straight to the point, "what did you think of the auction last night?"

"Auction?" she said, frowning. "Auction? What auction?"

"You know, that silly old thing they have in the lounge after dinner, selling numbers on the ship's daily run. I just wondered what you thought about it."

She shook her head, and again she smiled, a sweet and pleasant smile that had in it perhaps the trace of an apology. "I'm very lazy," she said. "I always

s go to bed early. I have my dinner in bed. It's so restful to have dinner in bed."

Mr Botibol smiled back at her and began to edge away. "Got to go and get my exercise now," he said. "Never miss my exercise in the morning. It was nice seeing you. Very nice seeing you..." He retreated about ten paces, and the woman let him go without looking around.

Everything was now in order. The sea was calm, he was lightly dressed for swimming, there were almost certainly no man-eating sharks in this part of the Atlantic, and there was this pleasant kindly old woman to give the alarm. It was a question now only of whether the ship would be delayed long enough to swing the balance in his favour. Almost certainly it would. In any event, he could do a little to help in that direction himself. He could make a few difficulties about getting hauled up into the lifeboat. Swim around a bit, back away from them surreptitiously as they tried to come up close to fish him out. Every minute, every second gained would help him win. He began to move forward again to the rail, but now a new fear assailed him. Would he get caught in the propeller? He had heard about that happening to persons falling off the sides of big ships. But then, he wasn't going to fall, he was going to jump, and that was a very different thing. Provided he jumped out far enough he would be sure to clear the propeller.

Mr Botibol advanced slowly to a position at the rail about twenty yards away from the woman. She wasn't looking at him now. So much the better. He didn't want her watching him as he jumped off. So long as no one was watching he would be able to say afterwards that he had slipped and fallen by accident. He peered over the side of the ship. It was a long, long drop. Come to think of it now, he might easily hurt himself badly if he hit the water flat. Wasn't there someone who once split his stomach open that way, doing a belly flop from the high dive? He must jump straight and land feet first. Go in like a knife. Yes, sir. The water seemed cold and deep and grey and it made him shiver to look at it. But it was now or never. Be a man, William Botibol, be a man. All right then now... here goes.

He climbed up on to the wide wooden toprail, stood there poised, balancing for three terrifying seconds, then he leaped--he leaped up and out as far as he could go and at the same time he shouted "Help!"

"Help! Help!" he shouted as he fell. Then he hit the water and went under.

When the first shout for help sounded, the woman who was leaning on the rail started up and gave a little jump of surprise. She looked around quickly and saw sailing past her through the air this small man dressed in white shorts and tennis shoes, spreadeagled and shouting as he went. For a moment she looked as though she weren't quite sure what she ought to do: throw a lifebelt, run away and give the alarm, or simply turn and yell. She drew back a

pace from the rail and swung half around facing up to the bridge, and for a brief moment she remained motionless, tense, undecided. Then almost at once she seemed to relax, and she leaned forward far over the rail, staring at the water where it was turbulent in the ship's wake. Soon a tiny round black head appeared in the foam, an arm raised above it, once, twice, vigorously waving, and a small faraway voice was heard calling something that was difficult to understand. The woman leaned still farther over the rail, trying to keep the little bobbing black speck in sight, but soon, so very soon, it was such a long way away that she couldn't even be sure it was there at all.

After a while another woman came out on deck. This one was bony and angular, and she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. She spotted the first woman and walked over to her, treading the deck in the deliberate, military fashion of all spinsters.

"So there you are," she said.

The woman with the fat ankles turned and looked at her, but said nothing.

"I've been searching for you," the bony one continued. "Searching all over . . ."

"It's very odd," the woman with the fat ankles said. "A man dived overboard just now, with his clothes on."

"Nonsense!"

"Oh yes. He said he wanted to get some exercise and he dived in and didn't even bother to take his clothes off."

"You better come down now," the bony woman said. Her mouth had suddenly become firm, her whole face sharp and alert, and she spoke less kindly than before. "And don't you ever go wandering about on deck alone like this again. You know quite well you're meant to wait for me."

"Yes, Maggie," the woman with the fat ankles answered, and again she smiled, a tender, trusting smile, and she took the hand of the other one and allowed herself to be led away across the deck.

"Such a nice man," she said. "He waved to me."

Gallopig Foxley

FIVE days a week, for thirty-six years, I have travelled the eight-twelve train to the City. It is never unduly crowded, and it takes me right in to Cannon Street Station, only an eleven and a half minute walk from the door of my office in Austin Friars.

I have always liked the process of commuting; every phase of the little journey is a pleasure to me. There is a regularity about it that is agreeable and

d comforting to a person of habit, and in addition, it serves as a sort of slipway along which I am gently but firmly launched into the waters of daily business routine.

Ours is a smallish country station and only nineteen or twenty people gather there to catch the eight-twelve. We are a group that rarely changes, and when occasionally a new face appears on the platform it causes a certain discriminatory, protestant ripple, like a new bird in a cage of canaries.

But normally, when I arrive in the morning with my usual four minutes to spare, there they all are, good, solid, steadfast people, standing in their right places with their right umbrellas and hats and ties and faces and their newspapers under their arms, as unchanged and unchangeable through the years as the furniture in my own living-room. I like that.

I like also my corner seat by the window and reading *The Times* to the noise and motion of the train. This part of it lasts thirty-two minutes and it seems to soothe both my brain and my fretful old body like a good long massage. Believe me, there's nothing like routine and regularity for preserving one's peace of mind. I have now made this morning journey nearly ten thousand times in all, and I enjoy it more and more every day. Also (irrelevant, but interesting), I have become a sort of clock. I can tell at once if we are running two, three, or four minutes late, and I never have to look up to know which station we are stopped at.

The walk at the other end from Cannon Street to my office is neither too long nor too short a healthy little perambulation along streets crowded with fellow commuters all proceeding to their places of work on the same orderly schedule as myself. It gives me a sense of assurance to be moving among these dependable, dignified people who stick to their jobs and don't go gadding about all over the world. Their lives like my own, are regulated nicely by the minute hand of an accurate watch, and very often our paths cross at the same times and places on the street each day.

For example, as I turn the corner into St Swithin's Lane, I invariably come head on with a genteel middle-aged lady who wears silver pincenez and carries a black brief-case in her hand--a first-rate accountant, I should say, or possibly an executive in the textile industry. When I cross over Threadneedle Street by the traffic lights, nine times out of ten I pass a gentleman who wears a different garden flower in his buttonhole each day. He dresses in black trousers and grey spats and is clearly a punctual and meticulous person, probably a banker, or perhaps a solicitor like myself; and several times in the last twenty-five years, as we have hurried past one another across the street, our eyes have met in a fleeting glance of mutual approval and respect.

At least half the faces I pass on this little walk are now familiar to me. And good faces they are too, my kind of faces, my kind of people--sound, sedulous, businesslike folk with none of that restlessness and glittering eye a

bout them that you see in all these so-called clever types who want to tip the world upside-down with their Labour Governments and socialized medicines and all the rest of it.

So you can see that I am, in every sense of the words, a contented commuter. Or would it be more accurate to say that I was a contented commuter? At the time when I wrote the little autobiographical sketch you have just read --intending to circulate it among the staff of my office as an exhortation and an example--I was giving a perfectly true account of my feelings. But that was a whole week ago, and since then something rather peculiar has happened. As a matter of fact, it started to happen last Tuesday, the very morning that I was carrying the rough draft up to Town in 'fly pocket; and this, to me, was so timely and coincidental that I can only believe it to have been the work of God. God had read my little essay and he had said to himself, 'This man Perkins is becoming over-complacent. It is high time I taught him a lesson.' I honestly believe that's what happened.

As I say, it was last Tuesday, the Tuesday after Easter, a warm yellow spring morning, and I was striding on to the platform of our small country station with *The Times* tucked under my arm and the draft of 'The Contented Commuter' in my pocket, when I immediately became aware that something was wrong. I could actually feel that curious little ripple of protest running along the ranks of my fellow commuters. I stopped and glanced around.

The stranger was standing plumb in the middle of the platform, feet apart and arms folded, looking for all the world as though he owned the whole place. He was a biggish, thickset man, and even from behind he somehow managed to convey a powerful impression of arrogance and oil. Very definitely, he was not one of us. He carried a cane instead of an umbrella, his shoes were brown instead of black, the grey hat was cocked at a ridiculous angle, and in one way and another there seemed to be an excess of silk and polish about his person. More than this I did not care to observe. I walked straight past him with my face to the sky, adding, I sincerely hope, a touch of real frost to an atmosphere that was already cool.

The train came in. And now, try if you can to imagine my horror when the new man actually followed me into my own compartment! Nobody had done this to me for fifteen years. My colleagues always respect my seniority. One of my special little pleasures is to have the place to myself for at least one, sometimes two or even three stations. But here, if you please, was this fellow, this stranger, straddling the seat opposite and blowing his nose and rustling the *Daily Mail* and lighting a disgusting pipe.

I lowered my *Times* and stole a glance at his face. I suppose he was about the same age as me--sixty-two or three--but he had one of those unpleasantly handsome, brown, leathery countenances that you see nowadays in advertisements for men's shirts--the lion shooter and the polo player and the Eve

rest climber and the tropical explorer and the racing yachtsman all rolled into one; dark eyebrows, steely eyes, strong white teeth clamping the stem of a pipe. Personally, I mistrust all handsome men. The superficial pleasures of this life come too easily to them, and they seem to walk the world as though they themselves were personally responsible for their own good looks. I don't mind a woman being pretty. That's different. But in a man, I'm sorry, but somehow or other I find it downright offensive. Anyway, here was this one sitting right opposite me in the carriage, and I was looking at him over the top of my Times when suddenly he glanced up and our eyes met.

"D'you mind the pipe?" he asked, holding it up in his fingers. That was all he said. But the sound of his voice had a sudden and extraordinary effect upon me. In fact, I think I jumped. Then I sort of froze up and sat staring at him for at least a minute before I got hold of myself and made an answer.

"This is a smoker," I said, "so you may do as you please."

"I just thought I'd ask."

There it was again, that curiously crisp, familiar voice, clipping its words and spitting them out very hard and small like a little quickfiring gun shooting out raspberry seeds. Where had I heard it before? and why did every word seem to strike upon some tiny tender spot far back in my memory? Good heavens, I thought. Pull yourself together. What sort of nonsense is this?

The stranger returned to his paper. I pretended to do the same. But by this time I was properly put out and I couldn't concentrate at all. Instead, I kept stealing glances at him over the top of the editorial page. It was really an intolerable face, vulgarly, almost lasciviously handsome, with an oily salacious sheen all over the skin. But had I or had I not seen it before some time in my life? I began to think I had, because now, even when I looked at it I felt a peculiar kind of discomfort that I cannot quite describe--something to do with pain and with violence, perhaps even with fear.

We spoke no more during the journey, but you can well imagine that by then my whole routine had been thoroughly upset. My day was ruined; and more than one of my clerks at the office felt the sharper edge of my tongue, particularly after luncheon when my digestion started acting up on me as well. The next morning, there he was again standing in the middle of the platform with his cane and his pipe and his silk scarf and his nauseatingly handsome face. I walked past him and approached a certain Mr Grummitt, a stockbroker who has been commuting with me for over twenty-eight years. I can't say I've ever had an actual conversation with him before--we are rather a reserved lot on our station--but a crisis like this will usually break the ice.

"Grummitt," I whispered. "Who's this bounder?"

"Search me," Grummitt said.

"Pretty unpleasant."

"Very."

"Not going to be a regular, I trust."

"Oh God," Grummitt said.

Then the train came in.

This time, to my relief, the man got into another compartment.

But the following morning I had him with me again.

"Well," he said, settling back in the seat directly opposite. "It's a topping day." And once again I felt that slow uneasy stirring of the memory, stronger than ever this time, closer to the surface but not yet quite within my reach.

Then came Friday, the last day of the week. I remember it had rained as I drove to the station, but it was one of those warm sparkling April showers that last only five or six minutes, and when I walked on to the platform, all the umbrellas were rolled up and the sun was shining and there were big white clouds floating in the sky. In spite of this, I felt depressed. There was no pleasure in this journey for me any longer. I knew the stranger would be there. And sure enough, he was, standing with his legs apart just as though he owned the place, and this time swinging his cane casually back and forth through the air.

The cane! That did it! I stopped like I'd been shot.

"It's Foxley!" I cried under my breath. "Gallop Foxley! And still swinging his cane!"

I stepped closer to get a better look. I tell you I've never had such a shock in all my life. It was Foxley all right. Bruce Foxley or Gallop Foxley as we used to call him. And the last time I'd seen him, let me see--it was at school and I was no more than twelve or thirteen years old.

At that point the train came in, and heaven help me if he didn't get into my compartment once again. He put his hat and cane up on the rack, then turned and sat down and began lighting his pipe. He glanced up at me through the smoke with those rather small cold eyes and he said, "Ripping day, isn't it. Just like summer."

There was no mistaking the voice now. It hadn't changed at all. Except that the things I had been used to hearing it say were different.

'All right, Perkins,' it used to say. 'All right, you nasty little boy. I am about to beat you again.'

How long ago was that? It must be nearly fifty years. Extraordinary, though, how little the features had altered. Still the same arrogant tilt of the chin, the flaring nostrils, the contemptuous staring eyes that were too small and a shade too close together for comfort; still the same habit of thrusting his face forward at you, impinging on you, pushing you into a corner; and even the hair I could remember--coarse and slightly wavy, with just a trace of oil all over it, like a well-tossed salad. He used to keep a bottle of green hair mixture on the side table in his study--when you have to dust a

room you get to know and to hate all the objects in it--and this bottle had the royal coat of arms on the label and the name of a shop in Bond Street, and under that, in small print, it said 'By Appointment--Hairdressers To His Majesty King Edward VII.' I can remember that particularly because it seemed so funny that a shop should want to boast about being hairdresser to someone who was practically bald--even a monarch.

And now I watched Foxley settle back in his seat and begin reading the paper. It was a curious sensation, sitting only a yard away from this man who fifty years before had made me so miserable that I had once contemplated suicide. He hadn't recognized me; there wasn't much danger of that because of my moustache. I felt fairly sure I was safe and could sit there and watch him all I wanted.

Looking back on it, there seems little doubt that I suffered very badly at the hands of Bruce Foxley my first year in school, and strangely enough, the unwitting cause of it all was my father. I was twelve and a half when I first went off to this fine old public school. That was, let me see, in 1907. My father, who wore a silk topper and morning coat, escorted me to the station, and I can remember how we were standing on the platform among piles of wooden tuck-boxes and trunks and what seemed like thousands of very large boys milling about and talking and shouting at one another, when suddenly somebody who was wanting to get by us gave my father a great push from behind and nearly knocked him off his feet.

My father, who was a small, courteous, dignified person, turned around with surprising speed and seized the culprit by the wrist.

"Don't they teach you better manners than that at this school, young man?" he said.

The boy, at least a head taller than my father, looked down at him with a cold, arrogantlaughing glare, and said nothing.

"It seems to me," my father said, staring back at him, "that an apology would be in order."

But the boy just kept on looking down his nose at my father with this funny little arrogant smile at the corners of his mouth, and his chin kept coming further and further out.

"You strike me as being an impudent and ill-mannered boy," my father went on. "And I can only pray that you are an exception in your school. I would not wish for any son of mine to pick up such habits."

At this point, the big boy inclined his head slightly in my direction, and a pair of small, cold, rather close together eyes looked down into mine. I was not particularly frightened at the time; I knew nothing about the power of senior boys over junior boys at public schools; and I can remember that I looked straight back at him in support of my father, whom I adored and respected.

When my father started to say something more, the boy simply turned away and sauntered slowly down the platform into the crowd.

Bruce Foxley never forgot this episode; and of course the really unlucky thing about it for me was that when I arrived at school I found myself in the same 'house' as him. Even worse than that--I was in his study. He was doing his last year, and he was a prefect 'a boazer' we called it and as such he was officially permitted to beat any of the fags in the house. But being in his study, I automatically became his own particular, personal slave. I was his valet and cook and maid and errand-boy, and it was my duty to see that he never lifted a finger for himself unless absolutely necessary. In no society that I know of in the world is a servant imposed upon to the extent that we wretched little fags were imposed upon by the boazers at school. In frosty or snowy weather I even had to sit on the seat of the lavatory (which was in an unheated outhouse) every morning after breakfast to warm it before Foxley came along.

I could remember how he used to saunter across the room in his loose-jointed, elegant way, and if a chair were in his path he would knock it aside and I would have to run over and pick it up. He wore silk shirts and always had a silk handkerchief tucked up his sleeve, and his shoes were made by someone called Lobb (who also had a royal crest). They were pointed shoes, and it was my duty to rub the leather with a bone for fifteen minutes each day to make it shine.

But the worst memories of all had to do with the changing room.

I could see myself now, a small pale shrimp of a boy standing just inside the door of this huge room in my pyjamas and bedroom slippers and brown camel-hair dressing-gown. A single bright electric bulb was hanging on a flex from the ceiling, and all around the walls the black and yellow football shirts with their sweaty smell filling the room, and the voice, the clipped, pip-spitting voice was saying, "So which is it to be this time? Six with the dressing-gown on--or four with it off?"

I never could bring myself to answer this question. I would simply stand there staring down at the dirty floor-planks, dizzy with fear and unable to think of anything except that this other larger boy would soon start smashing away at me with his long, thin, white stick, slowly, scientifically, skilfully, legally, and with apparent relish, and I would bleed. Five hours earlier, I had failed to get the fire to light in his study. I had spent my pocket money on a box of special firelighters and I had held a newspaper across the chimney opening to make a draught and I had knelt down in front of it and blown my guts out into the bottom of the grate; but the coals would not burn.

"If you're too obstinate to answer," the voice was saying, "then I'll have to decide for you." I wanted desperately to answer because I knew which one I had to choose. It's the first thing you learn when you arrive. Always keep

the dressing-gown on and take the extra strokes. Otherwise you're almost certain to get cut. Even three with it on is better than one with it off.

"Take it off then and get into the far corner and touch your toes. I'm going to give you four."

Slowly I would take it off and lay it on the ledge above the boot-lockers. And slowly I would walk over to the far corner, cold and naked now in my cotton pyjamas, treading softly and seeing everything around me suddenly very bright and flat and far away, like a magic lantern picture, and very big, and very unreal, and sort of swimming through the water in my eyes.

"Go on and touch your toes. Tighter--much tighter than that."

Then he would walk down to the far end of the changing-room and I would be watching him upside down between my legs, and he would disappear through a doorway that led down two steps into what we called 'the basin-passage'. This was a stone-floored corridor with wash basins along one wall, and beyond it was the bathroom. When Foxley disappeared I knew he was walking down to the far end of the basin-passage. Foxley always did that. Then, in the distance, but echoing loud among the basins and the tiles, I would hear the noise of his shoes on the stone floor as he started galloping forward, and through my legs I would see him leaping up the two steps into the changing-room and come bounding towards me with his face thrust forward and the cane held high in the air. This was the moment when I shut my eyes and waited for the crack and told myself that whatever happened I must not straighten up.

Anyone who has been properly beaten will tell you that the real pain does not come until about eight or ten seconds after the stroke. The stroke itself is merely a loud crack and a sort of blunt thud against your backside, numbing you completely (I'm told a bullet wound does the same). But later on, oh my heavens, it feels as if someone is laying a red hot poker right across your naked buttocks and it is absolutely impossible to prevent yourself from reaching back and clutching it with your fingers.

Foxley knew all about this time lag, and the slow walk back over a distance that must altogether have been fifteen yards gave each stroke plenty of time to reach the peak of its pain before the next one was delivered.

On the fourth stroke I would invariably straighten up. I couldn't help it.

It was an automatic defence reaction from a body that had had as much as it could stand.

"You flinched," Foxley would say. "That one doesn't count. Go on--down you get."

The next time I would remember to grip my ankles.

Afterwards he would watch me as I walked over--very stiff now and holding my backside--to put on my dressing-gown, but I would always try to keep turned away from him so he couldn't see my face. And when I went out,

it would be, "Hey, you! Come back!"

I was in the passage then, and I would stop and turn and stand in the doorway, waiting.

"Come here. Come on, come back here. Now--haven't you forgotten something?"

All I could think of at that moment was the excruciating burning pain in my behind.

"You strike me as being an impudent and ill-mannered boy," he would say, imitating my father's voice. "Don't they teach you better manners than that at this school?"

"Thank... you," I would stammer. "Thank you... for the beating."

And then back up the dark stairs to the dormitory and it became much better then because it was all over and the pain was going and the others were clustering round and treating me with a certain rough sympathy born of having gone through the same thing themselves, many times.

"Hey, Perkins, let's have a look."

"How many d'you get?"

"Five, wasn't it? We heard them easily from here."

"Come on, man. Let's see the marks."

I would take down my pyjamas and stand there, while this group of experts solemnly examined the damage.

"Rather far apart, aren't they? Not quite up to Foxley's usual standard."

"Two of them are close. Actually touching. Look these two are beauties!"

"That low one was a rotten shot."

"Did he go right down the basin-passage to start his run?"

"You got an extra one for flinching, didn't you?"

"By golly, old Foxley's really got it in for you, Perkins."

"Bleeding a bit too. Better wash it, you know."

Then the door would open and Foxley would be there, and everyone would scatter and pretend to be doing his teeth or saying his prayers while I was left standing in the centre of the room with my pants down.

"What's going on here?" Foxley would say, taking a quick look at his own handiwork. "You--Perkins! Put your pyjamas on properly and get to bed."

And that was the end of a day.

Through the week, I never had a moment of time to myself. If Foxley saw me in the study taking up a novel or perhaps opening my stamp album, he would immediately find something for me to do. One of his favourites, especially when it was raining outside, was, 'Oh, Perkins, I think a bunch of wild irises would look rather nice on my desk, don't you?'

Wild irises grew only around Orange Ponds. Orange Ponds was two miles down the road and half a mile across the fields. I would get up from my chair

r, put on my raincoat and my straw hat, take my umbrella--my broolly--and set off on this long and lonely trek. The straw hat had to be worn at all times outdoors, but it was easily destroyed by rain; therefore the broolly was necessary to protect the hat. On the other hand, you can't keep a broolly over your head while scrambling about on a woody bank looking for irises, so to save my hat from ruin I would put it on the ground under my broolly while I searched for flowers. In this way, I caught many colds.

But the most dreaded day was Sunday. Sunday was for cleaning the study, and how well I can remember the terrot of those mornings, the frantic dusting and scrubbing, and then the waiting for Foxley to come in to inspect.

"Finished?" he would ask.

"I... I think so."

Then he would stroll over to the drawer of his desk and take out a single white glove, fitting it slowly on to his right hand, pushing each finger well home, and I would stand there watching and trembling as he moved around the room running his white-gloved forefinger along the picture tops, the skirting, the shelves, the window sills, the lamp shades. I never took my eyes off that finger. For me it was an instrument of doom. Nearly always, it managed to discover some tiny crack that I had overlooked or perhaps hadn't even thought about; and when this happened Foxley would turn slowly around, smiling that dangerous little smile that wasn't a smile, holding up the white finger so that I should see for myself the thin smudge of dust that lay along the side of it.

"Well," he would say. "So you're a lazy little boy. Aren't you?" No answer

"Aren't you?"

"I thought I dusted it all."

"Are you or are you not a nasty, lazy little boy?"

"Y-yes."

"But your father wouldn't want you to grow up like that, would he? Your father is very particular about manners, is he not?"

No answer.

"I asked you, is your father particular about manners?"

"Perhaps--yes."

"Therefore I will be doing him a favour if I punish you, won't I?"

"I don't know."

"Won't I?"

"Y-yes."

"We will meet later then, after prayers, in the changing-room."

The rest of the day would be spent in an agony of waiting for the evening to come.

Oh my goodness, how it was all coming back to me now. Sunday was also

letter-writing time. 'Dear Mummy and Daddy--thank you very much for your letter. I hope you are both well. I am, except I have got a cold because I got caught in the rain but it will soon be over. Yesterday we played Shrewsbury and beat them 4-2. I watched and Foxley who you know is the head of our house scored one of our goals. Thank you very much for the cake. With love from William.'

I usually went to the lavatory to write my letter, or to the boot-hole, or the bathroom any place out of Foxley's way. But I had to watch the time. Tea was at four-thirty and Foxley's toast had to be ready. Every day I had to make toast for Foxley, and on weekdays there were no fires allowed in the studies, so all the fags, each making toast for his own studyholder, would have to crowd around the one small fire in the library, jockeying for position with his toastingfork. Under these conditions, I still had to see that Foxley's toast was (1) very crisp, (2) not burned at all, (3) hot and ready exactly on time. To fail in any one of these requirements was a 'beatable offence'.

"Hey, you! 'What's this?'"

"It's toast."

"Is this really your idea of toast?"

"Well... "You're too idle to make it right, aren't you?"

"I try to make it."

"You know what they do to an idle horse, Perkins?"

"Are you a horse?"

"Well--anyway, you're an ass--ha, ha so I think you qualify. I'll be seeing you later."

Oh, the agony of those days. To burn Foxley's toast was a 'beatable offence'. So was forgetting to take the mud off Foxley's football boots. So was failing to hang up Foxley's football clothes. So was rolling up Foxley's broom the wrong way round. So was banging the study door when Foxley was working. So was filling Foxley's bath too hot for him. So was not cleaning the buttons properly on Foxley's OTC uniform. So was making those blue metal-polish smudges on the uniform itself. So was failing to shine the soles of Foxley's shoes. So was leaving Foxley's study untidy at any time. In fact, so far as Foxley was concerned, I was practically a beatable offence myself.

I glanced out of the window. My goodness, we were nearly there. I must have been dreaming away like this for quite a while, and I hadn't even opened my Times. Foxley was still leaning back in the corner seat opposite me reading his Daily Mail, and through a cloud of blue smoke from his pipe I could see the top half of his face over the newspaper, the small bright eyes, the corrugated forehead, the wavy, slightly oily hair.

Looking at him now, after all that time, was a peculiar and rather exciting experience. I knew he was no longer dangerous, but the old memories were still there and I didn't feel altogether comfortable in his presence. It was s

omething like being inside the cage with a tame tiger.

What nonsense is this? I asked myself. Don't be so stupid. My heavens, if you wanted to you could go ahead and tell him exactly what you thought of him and he couldn't touch you. Hey--that was an idea!

Except that--well--after all, was it worth it? I was too old for that sort of thing now, and I wasn't sure that I really felt much anger towards him anyway.

So what should I do? I couldn't sit there staring at him like an idiot.

At that point, a little impish fancy began to take a hold of me. What I would like to do, I told myself, would be to lean across and tap him lightly on the knee and tell him who I was. Then I would watch his face. After that, I would begin talking about our schooldays together, making it just loud enough for the other people in the carriage to hear. I would remind him playfully of some of the things he used to do to me, and perhaps even describe the changing-room beatings so as to embarrass him a trifle. A bit of teasing and discomfort wouldn't do him any harm. And it would do me an awful lot of good.

Suddenly he glanced up and caught me staring at him. It was the second time this had happened, and I noticed a flicker of irritation in his eyes.

All right, I told myself. Here we go. But keep it pleasant and sociable and polite. It'll be much more effective that way, more embarrassing for him.

So I smiled at him and gave him a courteous little nod. Then, raising my voice, I said, "I do hope you'll excuse me. I'd like to introduce myself." I was leaning forward watching him closely so as not to miss the reaction. "My name is Perkins--William Perkins--and I was at Repton in 1907."

The others in the carriage were sitting very still, and I could sense that they were all listening and waiting to see what would happen next.

"I'm glad to meet you," he said, lowering the paper to his lap. "Mine's Fortescue--Jocelyn Fortescue, Eton 1916."

Skin

THAT year--1946--winter was a long time going. Although it was April, a freezing wind blew through the streets of the city, and overhead the snow clouds moved across the sky.

The old man who was called Drioli shuffled painfully along the sidewalk of the rue de Rivoli. He was cold and miserable, huddled up like a hedgehog in a filthy black coat, only his eyes and the top of his head visible above the turned-up collar.

The door of a café opened and the faint whiff of roasting chicken brought

ht a pain of yearning to the top of his stomach. He moved on glancing without any interest at the things in the shop windows--perfume, silk ties and shirts, diamonds, porcelain, antique furniture, finely bound books. Then a picture gallery. He had always liked picture galleries. This one had a single canvas on display in the window. He stopped to look at it. He turned to go on. He checked, looked back; and now, suddenly, there came to him a slight uneasiness, a movement of the memory, a distant recollection of something, somewhere, he had seen before. He looked again. It was a landscape, a clump of trees leaning madly over to one side as if blown by a tremendous wind, the sky swirling and twisting all around. Attached to the frame there was a little plaque, and on this it said: CHAIM SOUTINE (1894--1943).

Drioli stared at the picture, wondering vaguely what there was about it that seemed familiar. Crazy painting, he thought. Very strange and crazy--but I like it... Chaim Soutine Soutine... "By God!" he cried suddenly. "My little Kalmuck, that's who it is! My little Kalmuck with a picture in the finest shop in Paris! Just imagine that!"

The old man pressed his face closer to the window. He could remember the boy--yes, quite clearly he could remember him. But when? The rest of it was not so easy to recollect. It was so long ago. How long? Twenty--no, more like thirty years, wasn't it? Wait a minute. Yes--it was the year before the war, the first war, 1913. That was it. And this Soutine, this ugly little Kalmuck, a sullen brooding boy whom he had liked--almost loved--for no reason at all that he could think of except that he could paint.

And how he could paint! It was coming back more clearly now--the street, the line of refuse cans along the length of it, the rotten smell, the brown cats walking delicately over the refuse, and then the women, moist fat women sitting on the doorsteps with their feet upon the cobblestones of the street. Which Street? Where was it the boy had lived?

The Cite Falguiere, that was it! The old man nodded his head several times, pleased to have remembered the name. Then there was the studio with the single chair in it, and the filthy red couch that the boy had used for sleeping; the drunken parties, the cheap white wine, the furious quarrels, and always, always the bitter sullen face of the boy brooding over his work.

It was odd, Drioli thought, how easily it all came back to him now, how each single small remembered fact seemed instantly to remind him of another.

There was that nonsense with the tattoo, for instance. Now, that was a mad thing if ever there was one. How had it started? Ah, yes--he had got rich one day, that was it, and he had bought lots of wine. He could see himself now as he entered the studio with the parcel of bottles under his arm the boy sitting before the easel, and his (Drioli's) own wife standing in the centre of the room, posing for her picture.

"Tonight we shall celebrate," he said. "We shall have a little celebration, us three."

"What is it that we celebrate?" the boy asked, without looking up. "Is it that you have decided to divorce your wife so she can marry me?"

"No," Drioli said. "We celebrate because today I have made a great sum of money with my work."

"And I have made nothing. We can celebrate that also."

"If you like." Drioli was standing by the table unwrapping the parcel. He felt tired and he wanted to get at the wine. Nine clients in one day was all very nice, but it could play hell with a man's eyes. He had never done as many as nine before. Nine boozy soldiers and the remarkable thing was that no fewer than seven of them had been able to pay in cash. This had made him extremely rich. But the work was terrible on the eyes. Drioli's eyes were half closed from fatigue, the whites streaked with little connecting lines of red; and about an inch behind each eyeball there was a small concentration of pain. But it was evening now and he was wealthy as a pig, and in the parcel there were three bottles--one for his wife, one for his friend, and one for him. He had found the corkscrew and was drawing the corks from the bottles, each making a small plop as it came out.

The boy put down his brush. "Oh, Christ," he said. "How can one work with all this going on?"

The girl came across the room to look at the painting. Drioli came over also, holding a bottle in one hand, a glass in the other.

"No," the boy shouted, blazing up suddenly. "Please--no!" He snatched the canvas from the easel and stood it against the wall. But Drioli had seen it.

"I like it."

"It's terrible."

"It's marvellous. Like all the others that you do, it's marvellous. I love them all."

"The trouble is," the boy said, scowling, "that in themselves they are not nourishing. I cannot eat them."

"But still they are marvellous." Drioli handed him a tumblerful of the pale-yellow wine. "Drink it," he said. "It will make you happy."

Never, he thought, had he known a more unhappy person, or one with a gloomier face. He had spotted him in a café some seven months before, drinking alone, and because he had looked like a Russian or some sort of an Asiatic, Drioli had sat down at his table and talked.

"You are a Russian?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Minsk."

Drioli had jumped up and embraced him, crying that he too had been born in that city.

"It wasn't actually Minsk," the boy had said. "But quite near."

"Where?"

"Smilovichi, about twelve miles away."

"Smilovichi!" Drioli had shouted, embracing him again. "I walked there several times when I was a boy." Then he had sat down again, staring affect ionately at the other's face. "You know," he had said, "you don't look like a western Russian. You're like a Tartar, or a Kalmuck. You look exactly li ke a Kalmuck."

Now, standing in the studio, Drioli looked again at the boy as he took t he glass of wine and tipped it down his throat in one swallow. Yes, he did h ave a face like a Kalmuck--very broad and high-cheeked, with a wide coarse n ose. This broadness of the cheeks was accentuated by the ears which stood ou t sharply from the head. And then he had the narrow eyes, the black hair, th e thick sullen mouth of a Kalmuck, but the hands the hands were always a sur prise, so small and white like a lady's, with tiny thin fingers. "Give me so me more)" the boy said. "If we are to celebrate then let us do it properly."

Drioli distributed the wine and sat himself on a chair. The boy sat on th e old couch with Drioli's wife. The three bottles were placed on the floor be tween them.

"Tonight we shall drink as much as we possibly can," Drioli said. "I am exceptionally rich. I think perhaps I should go out now and buy some more bottles. How many shall I get?"

"Six more," the boy said. "Two for each."

"Good. I shall go now and fetch them."

"And I will help you."

In the nearest cafŽ Drioli bought six bottles of white wine, and then car ried them back to the studio. They placed them on the floor in two rows, and Drioli fetched the corkscrew and pulled the corks, all six of them; then they sat down again and continued to drink.

"It is only the very wealthy," Drioli said, "who can afford to celebrate in this manner."

"That is true," the boy said. "Isn't that true, Josie?"

"Of course."

"How do you feel, Josie?"

"Fine."

"Will you leave Drioli and marry me?," "Beautiful wine," Drioli said. "It i s a privilege to drink it."

Slowly, methodically, they set about getting themselves drunk. The proce ss was routine, but all the same there was a certain ceremony to be observed , and a gravity to be maintained, and a great number of things to be said, t

hen said again--and the wine must be praised, and the slowness was important too, so that there would be time to savour the three delicious stages of transition, especially (for Drioli) the one when he began to float and his feet did not really belong to him. That was the best period of them all--when he could look down at his feet and they were so far away that he would wonder what crazy person they might belong to and why they were lying around on the floor like that, in the distance.

After a while, he got up to switch on the light. He was surprised to see that the feet came with him when he did this, especially because he couldn't feel them touching the ground. It gave him a pleasant sensation of walking on air. Then he began wandering around the room, peeking slyly at the canvases stacked against the walls.

"Listen," he said at length. "I have an idea." He came across and stood before the couch, swaying gently. "Listen, my little Kalmuck."

"What?"

"I have a tremendous idea. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening to Josie."

"Listen to me, please. You are my friend my ugly little Kalmuck from Minsk and to me you are such an artist that I would like to have a picture, a lovely picture-- "Have them all. Take all you can find, but do not interrupt me when I am talking with your wife."

"No, no. Now listen. I mean a picture that I can have with me always... for ever wherever I go... whatever happens... but always with me... a picture by you." He reached forward and shook the boy's knee. "Now listen to me, please."

"Listen to him," the girl said.

"It is this. I want you to paint a picture on my skin, on my back. Then I want you to tattoo over what you have painted so that it will be there always."

"You have crazy ideas."

"I will teach you how to use the tattoo. It is easy. A child could do it."

"I am not a child."

"Please... "You are quite mad. What is it you want?" The painter looked up into the slow, dark, wine-bright eyes of the other man. "What in heaven's name is it you want?"

"You could do it easily! You could! You could!"

"You mean with the tattoo?"

"Yes, with the tattoo! I will teach you in two minutes!"

"Impossible!"

"Are you saying I do not know what I am talking about?"

No, the boy could not possibly be saying that because if anyone knew about the tattoo it was he Drioli. Had he not, only last month, covered a man

's whole belly with the most wonderful and delicate design composed entirely of flowers? What about the client who had had so much hair upon his chest that he had done him a picture of a grizzly bear so designed that the hair on the chest became the furry coat of the bear? Could he not draw the likeness of a lady and position it with such subtlety upon a man's arm that when the muscle of the arm was flexed the lady came to life and performed some astonishing contortions?

"All I am saying," the boy told him, "is that you are drunk and this is a drunken idea."

"We could have Josie for a model. A study of Josie upon my back. Am I not entitled to a picture of my wife upon my back?"

"Of Josie?"

"Yes." Drioli knew he only had to mention his wife and the boy's thick brown lips would loosen and begin to quiver.

"No," the girl said.

"Darling Josie, please. Take this bottle and finish it, then you will feel more generous. It is an enormous idea. Never in my life have I had such an idea before."

"What idea?"

"That he should make a picture of you upon my back. Am I not entitled to that?"

"A picture of me?"

"A nude study," the boy said. "It is an agreeable idea."

"Not nude," the girl said.

"It is an enormous idea," Drioli said.

"It's a damn crazy idea," the girl said.

"It is in any event an idea," the boy said. "It is an idea that calls for a celebration."

They emptied another bottle among them. Then the boy said, "It is no good. I could not possibly manage the tattoo. Instead, I will paint this picture on your back and you will have it with you so long as you do not take a bath and wash it off. If you never take a bath again in your life then you will have it always, as long as you live."

"No," Drioli said.

"Yes--and on the day that you decide to take a bath I will know that you do not any longer value my picture. It will be a test of your admiration for my art."

"I do not like the idea," the girl said. "His admiration for your art is so great that he would be unclean for many years. Let us have the tattoo. But not nude."

"Then just the head," Drioli said.

"I could not manage it."

"It is immensely simple. I will undertake to teach you in two minutes. You will see. I shall go now and fetch the instruments. The needles and the inks. I have inks of many different colours--as many different colours as you have paints, and far more beautiful..

"It is impossible."

"I have many inks. Have I not many different colours of inks, Josie?"

"Yes."

"You will see," Drioli said. "I will go now and fetch them." He got up from his chair and walked unsteadily, but with determination, out of the room.

In half an hour Drioli was back. "I have brought everything," he cried, waving a brown suitcase. "All the necessities of the tattooist are here in this bag."

He placed the bag on the table, opened it, and laid out the electric needles and the small bottles of coloured inks. He plugged in the electric needle, then he took the instrument in his hand and pressed a switch. It made a buzzing sound and the quarter inch of needle that projected from the end of it began to vibrate swiftly up and down. He threw off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. "Now look. Watch me and I will show you how easy it is. I will make a design on my arm, here."

His forearm was already covered with blue markings, but he selected a small clear patch of skin upon which to demonstrate.

"First, I choose my ink--let us use ordinary blue--and I dip the point of the needle in the ink... so... and I hold the needle up straight and I run it lightly over the surface of the skin like this... and with the little motor and the electricity, the needle jumps up and down and punctures the skin and the ink goes in and there you are. See how easy it is... see how I draw a picture of a greyhound here upon my arm... The boy was intrigued. "Now let me practise a little--on your arm."

With the buzzing needle he began to draw blue lines upon Drioli's arm. "It is simple," he said. "It is like drawing with pen and ink. There is no difference except that it is slower."

"There is nothing to it. Are you ready? Shall we begin?"

"At once."

"The model!" cried Drioli. "Come on, Josie!" He was in a bustle of enthusiasm now, tottering around the room arranging everything, like a child preparing for some exciting game. "Where will you have her? Where shall she stand?"

"Let her be standing there, by my dressingtable. Let her be brushing her hair. I will paint her with her hair down over her shoulders and her brushing it."

"Tremendous. You are a genius."

Reluctantly, the girl walked over and stood by the dressing table, carrying

g her glass of wine with her.

Drioli pulled off his shirt and stepped out of his trousers. He retained only his underpants and his socks and shoes, and he stood there swaying gently from side to side, his small body firm, white-skinned, almost hairless.

"Now," he said, "I am the canvas. Where will you place your canvas?"

"As always, upon the easel."

"Don't be crazy. I am the canvas."

"Then place yourself upon the easel. That is where you belong."

"How can I?"

"Are you the canvas or are you not the canvas?"

"I am the canvas. Already I begin to feel like a canvas."

"Then place yourself upon the easel. There should be no difficulty."

"Truly, it is not possible."

"Then sit on the chair. Sit back to front, then you can lean your drunken head against the back of it. Hurry now, for I am about to commence."

"I am ready. I am waiting."

"First," the boy said, "I shall make an ordinary painting. Then, if it pleases me, I shall tattoo over it." With a wide brush he began to paint upon the naked skin of the man's back.

"Aye! Aye!" Drioli screamed. "A monstrous centipede is marching down my spine!"

"Be still now! Be still!" The boy worked rapidly, applying the paint only in a thin blue wash so that it would not afterwards interfere with the process of tattooing. His concentration, as soon as he began to paint, was so great that it appeared somehow to supersede his drunkenness. He applied the brush strokes with quick jabs of the arm, holding the wrist stiff, and in less than half an hour it was finished.

"All right. That's all," he said to the girl, who immediately returned to the couch, lay down, and fell asleep.

Drioli remained awake. He watched the boy take up the needle and dip it in the ink; then he felt the sharp tickling sting as it touched the skin of his back. The pain, which was unpleasant but never extreme, kept him from going to sleep. By following the track of the needle and by watching the different colours of ink that the boy was using, Drioli amused himself trying to visualize what was going on behind him. The boy worked with an astonishing intensity. He appeared to have become completely absorbed in the little machine and in the unusual effects it was able to produce.

Far into the small hours of the morning the machine buzzed and the boy worked. Drioli could remember that when the artist finally stepped back and said, "It is finished," there was daylight outside and the sound of people walking in the street.

"I want to see it," Drioli said. The boy held up a mirror, at an angle, and

Drioli craned his neck to look.

"Good God!" he cried. It was a startling sight. The whole of his back, from the top of the shoulders to the base of the spine, was a blaze of colour --gold and green and blue and black and scarlet. The tattoo was applied so heavily it looked almost like an impasto. The boy had followed as closely as possible the original brush strokes, filling them in solid, and it was marvelous the way he had made use of the spine and the protrusion of the shoulder blades so that they became part of the composition. What is more, he had somehow managed to achieve--even with this slow process--a certain spontaneity. The portrait was quite alive; it contained much of that twisted, tortured quality so characteristic of Soutine's other work. It was not a good likeness. It was a mood rather than a likeness, the model's face vague and tipsy, the background swirling around her head in a mass of dark-green curling strokes.

"It's tremendous!"

"I rather like it myself." The boy stood back, examining it critically. "You know," he added, "I think it's good enough for me to sign." And taking up the buzzer again, he inscribed his name in red ink on the right-hand side, over the place where Drioli's kidney was.

The old man who was called Drioli was standing in a sort of trance, staring at the painting in the window of the picture-dealer's shop. It had been so long ago, all that almost as though it had happened in another life.

And the boy? What had become of him? He could remember now that after returning from the war--the first war--he had missed him and had questioned Josie.

"Where is my little Kalmuck?"

"He is gone," she had answered. "I do not know where, but I heard it said that a dealer had taken him up and sent him away to Czret to make more paintings."

"Perhaps he will return."

"Perhaps he will. Who knows?"

That was the last time they had mentioned him. Shortly afterwards they had moved to Le Havre where there were more sailors and business was better. The old man smiled as he remembered Le Havre. Those were the pleasant years, the years between the wars, with the small shop near the docks and the comfortable rooms and always enough work, with every day three, four, five sailors coming and wanting pictures on their arms. Those were truly the pleasant years.

Then had come the second war, and Josie being killed, and the Germans arriving, and that was the finish of his business. No one had wanted pictures on their arms any more after that. And by that time he was too old for any other kind of work. In desperation he had made his way back to Paris, hoping vaguely that things would be easier in the big city. But they were not.

And now, after the war was over, he possessed neither the means nor the energy to start up his small business again. It wasn't very easy for an old man to know what to do, especially when one did not like to beg. Yet how else could he keep alive?

Well, he thought, still staring at the picture. So that is my little Kal muck. And how quickly the sight of one small object such as this can stir the memory. Up to a few moments ago he had even forgotten that he had a tattoo on his back. It had been ages since he had thought about it. He put his face closer to the window and looked into the gallery. On the walls he could see many other pictures and all seemed to be the work of the same artist. There were a great number of people strolling around. Obviously it was a special exhibition.

On a sudden impulse, Drioli turned, pushed open the door of the gallery and went in.

It was a long room with thick wine-coloured carpet, and by God how beautiful and warm it was! There were all these people strolling about looking at the pictures, well-washed dignified people, each of whom held a catalogue in the hand. Drioli stood just inside the door, nervously glancing around, wondering whether he dared go forward and mingle with this crowd. But before he had had time to gather his courage, he heard a voice beside him saying, "What is it you want?"

The speaker wore a black morning coat. He was plump and short and had a very white face. It was a flabby face with so much flesh upon it that the cheeks hung down on either side of the mouth in two fleshy collops, spaniel wise. He came up close to Drioli and said again, "What is it you want?"

Drioli stood still.

"If you please," the man was saying, "take yourself out of my gallery."

"Am I not permitted to look at the pictures?"

"I have asked you to leave."

Drioli stood his ground. He felt suddenly overwhelmingly outraged.

"Let us not have trouble," the man was saying. "Come on now, this way." He put a fat white paw on Drioli's arm and began to push him firmly to the door.

That did it. "Take your goddam hands off me!" Drioli shouted. His voice rang clear down the long gallery and all the heads jerked around as one--all the startled faces stared down the length of the room at the person who had made this noise. A flunkey came running over to help, and the two men tried to hustle Drioli through the door. The people stood still, watching the struggle. Their faces expressed only a mild interest, and seemed to be saying, "It's all right. There's no danger to us. It's being taken care of."

"I, too!" Drioli was shouting. "I, too, have a picture by this painter! He was my friend and I have a picture which he gave me!"

"He's mad."

"A lunatic. A raving lunatic."

"Someone should call the police."

With a rapid twist of the body Drioli suddenly jumped clear of the two men, and before anyone could stop him he was running down the gallery shouting, "I'll show you! I'll show you! I'll show you!" He flung off his overcoat, then his jacket and shirt, and he turned so that his naked back was towards the people.

"There!" he cried, breathing quickly. "You see? There it is!"

There was a sudden absolute silence in the room, each person arrested in what he was doing, standing motionless in a kind of shocked, uneasy bewilderment. They were staring at the tattooed picture. It was still there, the colours as bright as ever, but the old man's back was thinner now, the shoulder blades protruded more sharply, and the effect, though not great, was to give the picture a curiously wrinkled, squashed appearance.

Somebody said, "My God, but it is!"

Then came the excitement and the noise of voices as the people surged forward to crowd around the old man.

"It is unmistakable!"

"His early manner, yes?"

"It is fantastic, fantastic!"

"And look, it is signed!"

"Bend your shoulders forward, my friend, so that the picture stretches out flat."

"Old one, when was this done?"

"In 1913," Drioli said, without turning around. "In the autumn of 1913."

"Who taught Soutine to tattoo?"

"I taught him."

"And the woman?"

"She was my wife."

The gallery owner was pushing through the crowd towards Drioli. He was calm now, deadly serious, making a smile with his mouth. "Monsieur," he said, "I will buy it." Drioli could see the loose fat upon the face vibrating as he moved his jaw. "I said I will buy it, Monsieur."

"How can you buy it?" Drioli asked softly.

"I will give two hundred thousand francs for it." The dealer's eyes were small and dark, the wings of his broad nose-base were beginning to quiver.

"Don't do it!" someone murmured in the crowd. "It is worth twenty times as much."

Drioli opened his mouth to speak. No words came, so he shut it; then he opened it again and said slowly. "But how can I sell it?" He lifted his hands, let them drop loosely to his sides. "Monsieur, how can I possibly sell it?"

All the sadness in the world was in his voice.

"Yes!" they were saying in the crowd. "How can he sell it? It is part of himself!"

"Listen," the dealer said, coming up close. "I will help you, I will make you rich. Together we shall make some private arrangement over this Picture, no?"

Drioli watched him with slow, apprehensive eyes. "But how can you buy it, Monsieur? What will you do with it when you have bought it? Where will you keep it? Where will you keep it tonight? And where tomorrow?"

"Ah, where will I keep it? Yes, where will I keep it? Now, where will I keep it? Well, now..." The dealer stroked the bridge of his nose with a fat white finger. "It would seem," he said, "that if I take the picture, I take you also. That is a disadvantage." He paused and stroked his nose again. "The picture itself is of no value until you are dead. How old are you, my friend?"

"Sixty-one."

"But you are perhaps not very robust, no?" The dealer lowered the hand from his nose and looked Drioli up and down, slowly, like a farmer appraising an old horse.

"I do not like this," Drioli said, edging away. "Quite honestly, Monsieur, I do not like it." He edged straight into the arms of a tall man who put out his hands and caught him gently by the shoulders. Drioli glanced around and apologized. The man smiled down at him, patting one of the old fellow's naked shoulders reassuringly with a hand encased in a canarycoloured glove.

"Listen, my friend," the stranger said, still smiling. "Do you like to swim and to bask yourself in the sun?"

Drioli looked up at him, rather startled.

"Do you like fine food and red wine from the great châteaux of Bordeaux?" The man was still smiling, showing strong white teeth with a flash of gold among them. He spoke in a soft coaxing manner, one gloved hand still resting on Drioli's shoulder. "Do you like such things?"

"Well yes," Drioli answered, still greatly perplexed. "Of course."

"And the company of beautiful women?"

"Why not?"

"And a cupboard full of suits and shirts made to your own personal measurements? It would seem that you are a little lacking for clothes."

Drioli watched this suave man, waiting for the rest of the proposition.

"Have you ever had a shoe constructed especially for your own foot?"

"You would like that?"

"Well..." "And a man who will shave you in the mornings and trim your hair?"

Drioli simply stood and gaped.

"And a plump attractive girl to manicure the nails of your fingers?"

Someone in the crowd giggled.

"And a bell beside your bed to summon your maid to bring your breakfast in the morning? Would you like these things, my friend? Do they appeal to you?"

Drioli stood still and looked at him.

"You see, I am the owner of the Hotel Bristol in Cannes. I now invite you to come down there and live as my guest for the rest of your life in luxury and comfort." The man paused, allowing his listener time to savour this cheerful prospect. "Your only duty--shall I call it your pleasure--will be to spend your time on my beach in bathing trunks, walking among my guests, sunning yourself, swimming, drinking cocktails. You would like that?"

There was no answer.

"Don't you see all the guests will thus be able to observe this fascinating picture by Soutine. You will become famous, and men will say, 'Look, there is the fellow with ten million francs upon his back.' You like this idea, Monsieur? It pleases you?"

Drioli looked up at the tall man in the canary gloves, still wondering whether this was some sort of a joke. "It is a comical idea," he said slowly. "But do you really mean it?"

"Of course I mean it."

"Wait." the dealer interrupted. "See here, old one. Here is the answer to our problem. I will buy the picture, and I will arrange with a surgeon to remove the skin from your back, and then you will be able to go off on your own and enjoy the great sum of money I shall give you for it."

"With no skin on my back?"

"No, no, please! You misunderstand. This surgeon will put a new piece of skin in the place of the old one. It is simple."

"Could he do that?"

"There is nothing to it."

"Impossible!" said the man with the canary gloves. "He's too old for such a major skingrafting operation. It would kill him. It would kill you, my friend."

"It would kill me?"

"Naturally. You would never survive. Only the picture would come through."

"In the name of God!" Drioli cried. He looked around aghast at the faces of the people watching him, and in the silence that followed, another man's voice, speaking quietly from the back of the group, could be heard saying, "Perhaps, if one were to offer this old man enough money, he might consent to kill himself on the spot. Who knows?" A few people sniggered. The dealer moved his feet uneasily on the carpet.

Then the hand in the canary glove was tapping Drioli again upon the sh

oulder. "Come on," the man was saying, smiling his broad white smile. "You and I will go and have a good dinner and we can talk about it some more while we eat. How's that? Are you hungry?"

Drioli watched him, frowning. He didn't like the man's long flexible neck, or the way he craned it forward at you when he spoke, like a snake.

"Roast duck and Chamberlin," the man was saying. He put a rich succulent accent on the words, splashing them out with his tongue. "And perhaps a soufflé aux marrons, light and frothy."

Drioli's eyes turned up towards the ceiling, his lips became loose and wet. One could see the poor old fellow beginning literally to drool at the mouth.

"How do you like your duck?" the man went on. "Do you like it very brown and crisp outside, or shall it be..."

"I am coming," Drioli said quickly. Already he had picked up his shirt and was pulling it frantically over his head. "Wait for me, Monsieur. I am coming." And within a minute he had disappeared out of the gallery with his new patron.

It wasn't more than a few weeks later that a picture by Soutine, of a woman's head, painted in an unusual manner, nicely framed and heavily varnished, turned up for sale in Buenos Aires. That and the fact that there is no hotel in Cannes called Bristol--causes one to wonder a little, and to pray for the old man's health, and to hope fervently that wherever he may be at this moment, there is a plump attractive girl to manicure the nails of his fingers, and a maid to bring him his breakfast in bed in the mornings.

Poison

IT must have been around midnight when I drove home, and as I approached the gates of the bungalow I switched off the headlamps of the car so the beam wouldn't swing in through the window of the side bedroom and wake Harry Pope. But I needn't have bothered. Coming up the drive I noticed his light was still on, so he was awake anyway unless perhaps he'd dropped off while reading.

I parked the car and went up the five steps to the balcony, counting each step carefully in the dark so I wouldn't take an extra one which wasn't there when I got to the top. I crossed the balcony, pushed through the screen doors into the house itself and switched on the light in the hall. I went across to the door of Harry's room, opened it quietly, and looked in.

He was lying on the bed and I could see he was awake. But he didn't move. He didn't even turn his head towards me, but I heard him say, "Timber,

Timber, come here."

He spoke slowly, whispering each word carefully, separately, and I pushed the door right open and started to go quickly across the room.

"Stop, wait a moment, Timber." I could hardly hear what he was saying. He seemed to be straining enormously to get the words out. "What's the matter, Harry?"

"Sshhh!" he whispered. "Sshhh! For God's sake don't make a noise. Take your shoes off before you come nearer. Please do as I say, Timber."

The way he was speaking reminded me of George Barling after he got shot in the stomach when he stood leaning against a crate containing a spare aeroplane engine, holding both hands on his stomach and saying things about the German pilot in just the same hoarse straining half whisper Harry was using now.

"Quickly, Timber, but take your shoes off first."

I couldn't understand about taking off the shoes but I figured that if he was as ill as he sounded I'd better humour him, so I bent down and removed the shoes and left them in the middle of the floor. Then I went over to his bed.

"Don't touch the bed! For God's sake don't touch the bed!" He was still speaking like he'd been shot in the stomach and I could see him lying there on his back with a single sheet covering three-quarters of his body. He was wearing a pair of pyjamas with blue, brown, and white stripes, and he was sweating terribly. It was a hot night and I was sweating a little myself, but not like Harry. His whole face was wet and the pillow around his head was sodden with moisture. It looked like a bad case of malaria to me.

"What is it, Harry?"

"A krait," he said. "A krait! Oh, my God! Where'd it bite you? How long ago?"

"Shut up," he whispered.

"Listen, Harry," I said, and I leaned forward and touched his shoulder. "We've got to be quick. Come on now, quickly, tell me where it bit you." He was lying there very still and tense as though he was holding on to himself hard because of sharp pain.

"I haven't been bitten," he whispered. "Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep."

I took a quick pace backwards, I couldn't help it, and I stared at his stomach or rather at the sheet that covered it. The sheet was rumpled in several places and it was impossible to tell if there was anything underneath.

"You don't really mean there's a krait lying on your stomach now?"

"I swear it."

"How did it get there?" I shouldn't have asked the question because it was easy to see he wasn't fooling. I should have told him to keep quiet.

"I was reading," Harry said, and he spoke very slowly, taking each word in turn and speaking it carefully so as not to move the muscles of his stomach. "Lying on my back reading and I felt something on my chest, behind the book. Sort of tickling. Then out of the corner of my eye saw this little krait sliding over my pyjamas. Small, about ten inches. Knew I mustn't move. Couldn't have anyway. Lay there watching it. Thought it would go over the top of the sheet." Harry paused and was silent for a few moments. His eyes looked down along his body towards the place where the sheet covered his stomach, and I could see he was watching to make sure his whispering wasn't disturbing the thing that lay there.

"There was a fold in the sheet," he said, speaking more slowly than ever now and so softly I had to lean close to hear him. "See it, it's still there. It went under that. I could feel it through my pyjamas, moving on my stomach. Then it stopped moving and now it's lying there in the warmth. Probably asleep. I've been waiting for you." He raised his eyes and looked at me.

"How long ago?"

"Hours," he whispered. "Hours and bloody hours and hours. I can't keep still much longer. I've been wanting to cough."

There was not much doubt about the truth of Harry's story. As a matter of fact it wasn't a surprising thing for a krait to do. They hang around people's houses and they go for the warm places. The surprising thing was that Harry hadn't been bitten. The bite is quite deadly except sometimes when you catch it at once and they kill a fair number of people each year in Bengal, mostly in the villages.

"All right, Harry," I said, and now I was whispering too. "Don't move and don't talk any more unless you have to. You know it won't bite unless it's frightened. We'll fix it in no time."

I went softly out of the room in my stocking feet and fetched a small sharp knife from the kitchen. I put it in my trouser pocket ready to use instantly in case something went wrong while we were still thinking out a plan. If Harry coughed or moved or did something to frighten the krait and got bitten, I was going to be ready to cut the bitten place and try to suck the venom out. I came back to the bedroom and Harry was still lying very quiet and sweating all over his face. His eyes followed me as I moved across the room to his bed and I could see he was wondering what I'd been up to. I stood beside him, trying to think of the best thing to do.

"Harry," I said, and now when I spoke I put my mouth almost on his ear so I wouldn't have to raise my voice above the softest whisper, "I think the best thing to do is for me to draw the sheet back very, very gently. Then we could have a look first. I think I could do that without disturbing it."

"Don't be a damn fool." There was no expression in his voice. He spoke each word too slowly, too carefully, and too softly for that. The expression

was in the eyes and around the corners of the mouth.

"Why not?"

"The light would frighten him. It's dark under there now."

"Then how about whipping the sheet back quick and brushing it off before it had time to strike?"

"Why don't you get a doctor?" Harry said. The way he looked at me told me I should have thought of that myself in the first place.

"A doctor. Of course. That's it. I'll get Ganderbai."

I tiptoed out to the hail, looked up Ganderbai's number in the book, lifted the phone and told the operator to hurry.

"Dr Ganderbai," I said. "This is Timber Woods."

"Hello, Mr Woods. You not in bed yet?"

"Look, could you come round at once? And bring serum--for a krait bite."

"Who's been bitten?" The question came so sharply it was like a small explosion in my ear.

"No one. No one yet. But Harry Pope's in bed and he's got one lying on his stomach asleep under the sheet lying on his stomach."

For about three seconds there was silence on the line. Then speaking slowly, not like an explosion now but slowly, precisely, Ganderbai said, "Tell him to keep quite still. He is not to move or to talk. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"I'll come at once!" He rang off and I went back to the bedroom. Harry's eyes watched me as I walked across to his bed.

"Ganderbai's coming. He said for you to lie still."

"What in God's name does he think I'm doing!"

"Look, Harry, he said no talking. Absolutely no talking. Either of us."

"Why don't you shut up then?" When he said this one side of his mouth started twitching with rapid little downward movements that continued for a while after he finished speaking. I took out my handkerchief and very gently I wiped the sweat off his face and neck, and I could feel the slight twitching of the muscle--the one he used for smiling--as my fingers passed over it with the handkerchief.

I slipped out to the kitchen, got some ice from the ice-box, rolled it up in a napkin, and began to crush it small. That business of the mouth, I didn't like that. Or the way he talked, either. I carried the ice pack to the bedroom and laid it across Harry's forehead.

"Keep you cool."

He screwed up his eyes and drew breath sharply through his teeth. "Take it away," he whispered. "Make me cough." His smiling muscle began to twitch again.

The beam of a headlamp shone through the window as Ganderbai's car swu

ng around to the front of the bungalow. I went out to meet him, holding the ice pack with both hands.

"How is it?" Ganderbai asked, but he didn't stop to talk; he walked on past me across the balcony and through the screen doors into the hail. "Where is he? Which room?"

He put his bag down on a chair in the hail and followed me into Harry's room. He was wearing soft-soled bedroom slippers and he walked across the floor noiselessly, delicately, like a careful cat. Harry watched him out of the sides of his eyes. When Ganderbai reached the bed he looked down at Harry and smiled, confident and reassuring, nodding his head to tell Harry it was a simple matter and he was not to worry but just to leave it to Dr Ganderbai. Then he turned and went back to the hail and I followed him.

"First thing is to try and get some of the serum into him," he said, and he opened his bag and started to make preparations. "Intravenously. But I must do it neatly. Don't want to make him flinch."

We went into the kitchen and he sterilized a needle. He had a hypodermic syringe in one hand and a small bottle in the other and he stuck the needle through the rubber top and began drawing a pale yellow liquid up into the syringe by pulling out the plunger. Then he handed the syringe to me.

"Hold that till I ask for it."

He picked up the bag and together we returned to the room. Harry's eyes were bright now and wide open. Ganderbai bent over Harry and very cautiously, like a man handling sixteenth-century lace, he rolled up the pyjama sleeve to the elbow without moving the arm. I noticed he stood well away from the bed.

He whispered, "I'm going to give you an injection. Serum. Just a prick but try not to move. Don't tighten your stomach muscles. Let them go limp."

Harry looked at the syringe.

Ganderbai took a piece of red rubber tubing from his bag and slid one end up and around Harry's biceps; then he tied the tubing tight with a knot. He sponged a small area of the bare forearm with alcohol, handed the swab to me and took the syringe from my hand. He held it up to the light, squinting at the calibrations, squirting out some of the yellow fluid. I stood beside him, watching. Harry was watching too and sweating all over his face so it shone like it was smeared thick with face cream melting on his skin and running down on to the pillow.

I could see the blue vein on the inside of Harry's forearm, swollen now because of the tourniquet, and then I saw the needle above the vein, Ganderbai holding the syringe almost flat against the arm, sliding the needle in sideways through the skin into the blue vein, sliding it slowly but so firmly it went in smooth as into cheese. Harry looked at the ceiling and closed his eyes and opened them again, but he didn't move.

When it was finished Ganderbai leaned forward putting his mouth close to Harry's ear. "Now you'll be all right even if you are bitten. But don't move. Please don't move. I'll be back in a moment."

He picked up his bag and went out to the hail and I followed.

"Is he safe now?" I asked.

"How safe is he?"

The little Indian doctor stood there in the hall rubbing his lower lip.

"It must give him some protection, mustn't it?" I asked.

He turned away and walked to the screen doors that led on to the veranda. I thought he was going through them, but he stopped this side of the doors and stood looking out into the night.

"Isn't the serum very good?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not," he answered without turning round. "It might save him. It might not. I am trying to think of something else to do."

"Shall we draw the sheet back and brush it off before it has any time to strike?"

"Never! We are not entitled to take a risk." He spoke sharply and his voice was pitched a little higher than usual.

"We can't very well leave him lying there," I said. "He's getting nervous."

"Please! Please!" he said, turning round, holding both hands up in the air. "Not so fast, please. This is not a matter to rush into baldheaded." He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and stood there, frowning, nibbling his lip.

"You see," he said at last. "There is a way to do this. You know what we must do--we must administer an anaesthetic to the creature where it lies."

It was a splendid idea.

"It is not safe," he continued, "because a snake is cold blooded and anaesthetic does not work so well or so quick with such animals, but it is better than any other thing to do. We could use ether... chloroform..." He was speaking slowly and trying to think the thing out while he talked.

"Which shall we use?"

"Chloroform," he said suddenly. "Ordinary chloroform. That is best. Now quick!" He took my arm and pulled me towards the balcony. "Drive to my house! By the time you get there I will have waked up my boy on the telephone and he will show you my poisons cupboard. Here is the key of the cupboard. Take a bottle of chloroform. It has an orange label and the name is printed on it. I stay here in case anything happens. Be quick now, hurry! No, no, you don't need your shoes!"

I drove fast and in about fifteen minutes I was back with the bottle of chloroform. Ganderbai came out of Harry's room and met me in the hail. "You got it?" he said. "Good, good. I've just been telling him what we are going to

do. But now we must hurry. It is not easy for him in there like that all this time. I am afraid he might move."

He went back to the bedroom and I followed, carrying the bottle carefully with both hands. Harry was lying on the bed in precisely the same position as before with the sweat pouring down his cheeks. His face was white and wet. He turned his eyes towards me and I smiled at him and nodded confidently. He continued to look at me. I raised my thumb, giving him the okay signal. He closed his eyes. Ganderbai was squatting down by the bed, and on the floor beside him was the hollow rubber tube that he had previously used as a tourniquet, and he'd got a small paper funnel fitted into one end of the tube.

He began to pull a little piece of sheet out from under the mattress. He was working directly in line with Harry's stomach, about eighteen inches from it, and I watched his fingers as they tugged gently at the edge of the sheet. He worked so slowly it was almost impossible to discern any movement either in his fingers or in the sheet that was being pulled.

Finally he succeeded in making an opening under the sheet and he took the rubber tube and inserted one end of it in the opening so that it would slide under the sheet along the mattress towards Harry's body. I do not know how long it took him to slide that tube in a few inches. It may have been twenty minutes, it may have been forty. I never once saw the tube move. I knew it was going in because the visible part of it grew shorter, but I doubted that the krait could have felt even the slightest vibration. Ganderbai himself was sweating now, large pearls of sweat standing out all over his forehead and along his upper lip. But his hands were steady and I noticed that his eyes were watching, not the tube in his hands, but the area of crumpled sheet above Harry's stomach.

Without looking up, he held out a hand to me for the chloroform. I twisted out the ground-glass stopper and put the whole bottle right into his hand, not letting go until I was sure he had a good hold on it. Then he jerked his head for me to come closer and he whispered, "Tell him I'm going to soak the mattress and that it will be very cold under his body. He must be ready for that and he must not move. Tell him now."

I bent over Harry and passed on the message.

"Why doesn't he get on with it?" Harry said.

"He's going to now, Harry. But it'll feel very cold, so be ready for it."

"Oh, God Almighty, get on, get on!" For the first time he raised his voice, and Ganderbai glanced up sharply, watched him for a few seconds, then went back to his business.

Ganderbai poured a few drops of chloroform into the paper funnel and waited while it ran down the tube. Then he poured some more. Then he waited again, and the heavy sickening smell of chloroform spread out all over the

the room bringing with it faint unpleasant memories of white-coated nurses and white surgeons standing in a white room around a long white table. Ganderbai was pouring steadily now and I could see the heavy vapour of the chloroform swirling slowly like smoke above the paper funnel. He paused, held the bottle up to the light, poured one more funneful and handed the bottle back to me. Slowly he drew out the rubber tube from under the sheet; then he stood up.

The strain of inserting the tube and pouring the chloroform must have been great, and I recollect that when Ganderbai turned and whispered to me, his voice was small and tired. "We'll give it fifteen minutes. Just to be safe."

I leaned over to tell Harry, "We're going to give it fifteen minutes, just to be safe. But it's probably done for already."

"Then why for God's sake don't you look and see!" Again he spoke loudly and Ganderbai sprang round, his small brown face suddenly very angry. He had almost pure black eyes and he stared at Harry and Harry's smiling-muscle started to twitch. I took my handkerchief and wiped his wet face, trying to stroke his forehead a little for comfort as I did so. Then we stood and waited beside the bed, Ganderbai watching Harry's face all the time in a curious intense manner. The little Indian was concentrating all his will power on keeping Harry quiet. He never once took his eyes from the patient and although he made no sound, he seemed somehow to be shouting at him all the time, saying: Now listen, you've got to listen, you're not going to go spoiling this now, d'you hear me; and Harry lay there twitching his mouth, sweating, closing his eyes, opening them, looking at me, at the sheet, at the ceiling, at me again, but never at Ganderbai. Yet somehow Ganderbai was holding him. The smell of chloroform was oppressive and it made me feel sick, but I couldn't leave the room now. I had the feeling someone was blowing up a huge balloon and I could see it was going to burst, but I couldn't look away.

At length Ganderbai turned and nodded and I knew he was ready to proceed. "You go over to one side of the bed," he said. "We will each take one side of the sheet and draw it back together, but very slowly, please, and very quietly."

"Keep still now, Harry," I said and I went around to the other side of the bed and took hold of the sheet. Ganderbai stood opposite me, and together we began to draw back the sheet, lifting it up clear of Harry's body, taking it back very slowly, both of us standing well away but at the same time bending forward, trying to peer underneath it. The smell of chloroform was awful. I remember trying to hold my breath and when I couldn't do that any longer I tried to breathe shallow so the stuff wouldn't get into my lungs.

The whole of Harry's chest was visible now, or rather the striped pyjama top which covered it, and then I saw the white cord of his pyjama trousers, neatly tied in a bow. A little farther and I saw a button, a mother-of-pear

l button, and that was something I had never had on my pyjamas, a fly button, let alone a mother-of-pearl one. This Harry, I thought, he is very refined. It is odd how one sometimes has frivolous thoughts at exciting moments, and I distinctly remember thinking about Harry being very refined when I saw that button.

Apart from the button there was nothing on his stomach.

We pulled the sheet back faster then, and when we had uncovered his legs and feet we let the sheet drop over the end of the bed on to the floor.

"Don't move," Ganderbai said, "don't move, Mr Pope"; and he began to peer around along the side of Harry's body and under his legs.

"We must be careful," he said. "It may be anywhere. It could be up the leg of his pyjamas."

When Ganderbai said this, Harry quickly raised his head from the pillow and looked down at his legs. It was the first time he had moved. Then suddenly he jumped up, stood on his bed and shook his legs one after the other violently in the air. At that moment we both thought he had been bitten and Ganderbai was already reaching down into his bag for a scalpel and a tourniquet when Harry ceased his caperings and stood still and looked down at the mattress he was standing on and shouted, "It's not there!"

Ganderbai straightened up and for a moment he too looked at the mattress; then he looked up at Harry. Harry was all right. He hadn't been bitten and now he wasn't going to get bitten and he wasn't going to be killed and everything was fine. But that didn't seem to make anyone feel any better.

"Mr Pope, you are of course quite sure you saw it in the first place?" There was a note of sarcasm in Ganderbai's voice that he would never have employed in ordinary circumstances. "You don't think you might possibly have been dreaming, do you, Mr Pope?" The way Ganderbai was looking at Harry, I realized that the sarcasm was not seriously intended. He was only easing up a bit after the strain.

Harry stood on his bed in his striped pyjamas, glaring at Ganderbai, and the colour began to spread out all over his cheeks.

"Are you telling me I'm a liar?" he shouted.

Ganderbai remained absolutely still, watching Harry. Harry took a pace forward on the bed and there was a shining look in his eyes.

"Why, you dirty little Hindu sewer rat!"

"Shut up, Harry!" I said.

"You dirty black-- "Harry!" I called. "Shut up, Harry!" It was terrible the things he was saying.

Ganderbai went out of the room as though neither of us was there and I followed him and put my arm around his shoulder as he walked across the hallway and out on to the balcony.

"Don't you listen to Harry," I said. "This thing's made him so he doesn't

know what he's saying."

We went down the steps from the balcony to the drive and across the drive in the darkness to where his old Morris car was parked. He opened the door and got in.

"You did a wonderful job," I said. "Thank you very much for coming."

"All he needs is a good holiday," he said quietly, without looking at me, then he started the engine and drove off.

The Wish

UNDER the palm of one hand the child became aware of the scab of an old cut on his kneecap. He bent forward to examine it closely. A scab was always a fascinating thing; it presented a special challenge he was never able to resist.

Yes, he thought, I will pick it off, even if it isn't ready, even if the middle of it sticks, even if it hurts like anything.

With a fingernail he began to explore cautiously around the edges of the scab. He got a nail underneath it, and when he raised it, but ever so slightly, it suddenly came off, the whole hard brown scab came off beautifully, leaving an interesting little circle of smooth red skin.

Nice. Very nice indeed. He rubbed the circle and it didn't hurt. He picked up the scab, put it on his thigh and flipped it with a finger so that it flew away and landed on the edge of the carpet, the enormous red and black and yellow carpet that stretched the whole length of the hall from the stairs on which he sat to the front door in the distance. A tremendous carpet. Bigger than the tennis lawn. Much bigger than that. He regarded it gravely, setting his eyes upon it with mild pleasure. He had never really noticed it before, but now, all of a sudden the colours seemed to brighten mysteriously and spring out at him in a most dazzling way. You see, he told himself, I know how it is. The red parts of the carpet are red-hot lumps of coal. What I must do is this: I must walk all the way along it to the front door without touching them. If I touch the red I will be burnt. As a matter of fact, I will be burnt up completely. And the black parts of the carpet... yes, the black parts are snakes, poisonous snakes, adders mostly, and cobras, thick like tree-trunks round the middle, and if I touch one of them, I'll be bitten and I'll die before tea time. And if I get across safely, without being burnt and without being bitten, I will be given a puppy for my birthday tomorrow.

He got to his feet and climbed higher up the stairs to obtain a better view of this vast tapestry of colour and death. Was it possible? Was there enough yellow? Yellow was the only colour he was allowed to walk on. Could it

be done? This was not a journey to be undertaken lightly; the risks were far too great for that. The child's face--a fringe of white-gold hair, two large blue eyes, a small pointed chin peered down anxiously over the banisters. The yellow was a bit thin in places and there were one or two widish gaps, but it did seem to go all the way along to the other end. For someone who had only yesterday triumphantly travelled the whole length of the brick path from the stables to the summer-house without touching the cracks, this carpet thing should not be too difficult. Except for the snakes. The mere thought of snakes sent a fine electricity of fear running like pins down the backs of his legs and under the soles of his feet.

He came slowly down the stairs and advanced to the edge of the carpet. He extended one small sandalled foot and placed it cautiously upon a patch of yellow. Then he brought the other foot up, and there was just enough room for him to stand with the two feet together. There! He had started! His bright oval face was curiously intent, a shade whiter perhaps than before, and he was holding his arms out sideways to assist his balance. He took another step, lifting his foot high over a patch of black, aiming carefully with his toe for a narrow channel of yellow on the other side. When he had completed the second step he paused to rest, standing very stiff and still. The narrow channel of yellow ran forward unbroken for at least five yards and he advanced gingerly along it, bit by bit, as though walking a tightrope. Where it finally curled off sideways, he had to take another long stride, this time over a vicious-looking mixture of black and red. Halfway across he began to wobble. He waved his arms around wildly, windmill fashion, to keep his balance, and he got across safely and rested again on the other side. He was quite breathless now, and so tense he stood high on his toes all the time, arms out sideways, fists clenched. He was on a big safe island of yellow. There was lots of room on it, he couldn't possibly fall off, and he stood there resting, hesitating, waiting, wishing he could stay for ever on this big safe yellow island. But the fear of not getting the puppy compelled him to go on. Step by step, he edged further ahead, and between each one he paused to decide exactly where he should put his foot. Once, he had a choice of ways, either to left or right, and he chose the left because although it seemed the more difficult, there was not so much black in that direction. The black was what had made him nervous. He glanced quickly over his shoulder to see how far he had come. Nearly halfway. There could be no turning back now. He was in the middle and he couldn't turn back and he couldn't jump off sideways either because in that lay ahead of him, he felt that old sudden sickening surge of panic in his chest--like last Easter time, that afternoon when he got lost all alone in the darkest part of Piper's Wood.

He took another step, placing his foot carefully upon the only little pie

ce of yellow within reach, and this time the point of the foot came within a centimetre of some black. It wasn't touching the black, he could see it wasn't touching, he could see the small line of yellow separating the toe of his sandal from the black; but the snake stirred as though sensing his nearness, and raised its head and gazed at the foot with bright beady eyes, watching to see if it was going to touch.

"I'm not touching you! You mustn't bite me! You know I'm not touching you!"

Another snake slid up noiselessly beside the first, raised its head, two heads now, two pairs of eyes staring at the foot, gazing at a little naked place just below the sandal strap where the skin showed through. The child went high up on his toes and stayed there, frozen stiff with terror. It was minutes before he dared to move again.

The next step would have to be a really long one. There was this deep curling river of black that ran clear across the width of the carpet, and he was forced by his position to cross it at its widest part. He thought first of trying to jump it, but decided he couldn't be sure of landing accurately on the narrow band of yellow on the other side. He took a deep breath, lifted one foot, and inch by inch he pushed it out in front of him, far far out, then down and down until at last the tip of his sandal was across and resting safely on the edge of the yellow. He leaned forward, transferring his weight to his front foot. Then he tried to bring the back foot up as well. He strained and pulled and jerked his body, but the legs were too wide apart and he couldn't make it. He tried to get back again. He couldn't do that either. He was doing the splits and he was properly stuck. He glanced down and saw this deep curling river of black underneath him. Parts of it were stirring now, and uncoiling and beginning to shine with a dreadfully oily glister. He wobbled, waved his arms frantically to keep his balance, but that seemed to make it worse. He was starting to go over. He was going over to the right, quite slowly he was going over, then faster and faster, and at the last moment, instinctively he put out a hand to break the fall and the next thing he saw was this bare hand of his going right into the middle of a great glistening mass of black and he gave one piercing cry as it touched.

Outside in the sunshine, far away behind the house, the mother was looking for her son.

Neck

WHEN, about eight years ago, old Sir William Turton died and his son Basil inherited The Turton Press (as well as the title), I can remember how the

y started laying bets around Fleet Street as to how long it would be before some nice young woman managed to persuade the little fellow that she must look after him. That is to say, him and his money.

The new Sir Basil Turton was maybe forty years old at the time, a bachelor, a man of mild and simple character who up to then had shown no interest in anything at all except his collection of modern paintings and sculpture. No woman had disturbed him; no scandal or gossip had ever touched his name. But now that he had become the proprietor of quite a large newspaper and magazine empire, it was necessary for him to emerge from the calm of his father's country house and come up to London.

Naturally, the vultures started gathering at once, and I believe that not only Fleet Street but very nearly the whole of the city was looking on eagerly as they scrambled for the body. It was slow motion, of course, deliberate and deadly slow motion, and therefore not so much like vultures as a bunch of agile crabs clawing for a piece of horsemeat under water.

But to everyone's surprise the little chap proved to be remarkably elusive, and the chase dragged on right through the spring and early summer of that year. I did not know Sir Basil personally, nor did I have any reason to feel friendly towards him, but I couldn't help taking the side of my own sex and found myself cheering loudly every time he managed to get himself off the hook.

Then, round about the beginning of August, apparently at some secret female signal, the girls declared a sort of truce among themselves while they went abroad, and rested, and regrouped, and made fresh plans for the winter kill. This was a mistake because precisely at that moment a dazzling creature called Natalia something or other, whom nobody had heard of before, swept in from the Continent, took Sir Basil firmly by the wrist and led him off in a kind of swoon to the Registry Office at Caxton Hall where she married him before anyone else, least of all the bridegroom, realized what was happening.

You can imagine that the London ladies were indignant, and naturally they started disseminating a vast amount of fruity gossip about the new Lady Turton ('That dirty poacher,' they called her). But we don't have to go into that. In fact, for the purposes of this story we can skip the next six years, which brings us right up to the present, to an occasion exactly one week ago today when I myself had the pleasure of meeting her ladyship for the first time. By now, as you must have guessed, she was not only running the whole of The Turton Press, but as a result had become a considerable political force in the country. I realize that other women have done this sort of thing before, but what made her particular case unusual was the fact that she was a foreigner and that nobody seemed to know precisely what country she came from--Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, or Russia.

So last Thursday I went to this small dinner party at a friend's in London, and while we were standing around in the drawing-room before the meal, sipping good Martinis and talking about the atom bomb and Mr Bevan, the maid popped her head in to announce the last guest.

"Lady Turton," she said.

Nobody stopped talking; we were too well mannered for that. No heads were turned. Only our eyes swung round to the door, waiting for the entrance.

She came in fast--tall and slim in a red-gold dress with sparkles on it--the mouth smiling, the hand outstretched towards her hostess, and my heavens, I must say she was a beauty.

"Mildred, good evening!"

"My dear Lady Turton! How nice!"

I believe we did stop talking then, and we turned and stared and stood waiting quite meekly to be introduced, just like she might have been the Queen or a famous film star. But she was better looking than either of those. The hair was black, and to go with it she had one of those pale, oval, innocent fifteenth-century Flemish faces, almost exactly a Madonna by Memling or Van Eyck. At least that was the first impression. Later, when my turn came to shake hands, I got a closer look and saw that except for the outline and colouring it wasn't really a Madonna at all--far, far from it.

The nostrils for example were very odd, somehow more open, more flaring than any I had seen before, and excessively arched. This gave the whole nose a kind of open, snorting look that had something of the wild animal about it the mustang.

And the eyes when I saw them close, were not wide and round the way the Madonna painters used to make them, but long and half-closed, half smiling, half sullen, and slightly vulgar, so that in one way and another they gave her a most delicately dissipated air. What's more they didn't look at you directly. They came to you slowly from over on one side with a curious sliding motion that made me nervous. I tried to see their colour, thought it was pale grey, but couldn't be sure.

Then she was led away across the room to meet other people. I stood watching her. She was clearly conscious of her success and of the way these Londoners were deferring to her. 'Here am I,' she seemed to be saying, 'and I only came over a few years ago, but already I am richer and more powerful than any of you.' There was a little prance of triumph in her walk.

A few minutes later we went in to dinner, and to my surprise I found myself seated at her ladyship's right. I presumed that our hostess had done this as a kindness to me, thinking I might pick up some material for the social column I write each day in the evening paper. I settled myself down ready for an interesting meal. But the famous lady took no notice of me at all; she

spent her time talking to the man on her left; the host. Until at last, just as I was finishing my ice-cream, she suddenly turned, reached over, picked up my place card and read the name. Then, with that queer sliding motion of the eyes she looked into my face. I smiled and made a little bow. She didn't smile back, but started shooting questions at me, rather personal questions--job, age, family, things like that in a peculiar lapping voice, and I found myself answering as best I could.

During this inquisition it came out among other things that I was a lover of painting and sculpture.

"Then you should come down to the country some time and see my husband's collection." She said it casually, merely as a form of conversation, but you must realize that in my job I cannot afford to lose an opportunity like this.

"How kind of you, Lady Turton. But I'd simply love to. When shall I come?"

Her head went up and she hesitated, frowned, shrugged her shoulders and then said, "Oh I don't care. Any time."

"How about this next week-end? Would that be all right?"

The slow narrow eyes rested a moment on mine, then travelled away. "I suppose so, if you wish. I don't care."

And that was how the following Saturday afternoon I came to be driving down to Wooton with my suitcase in the back of the car. You may think that perhaps I forced the invitation a bit, but I couldn't have got it any other way. And apart from the professional aspect, I personally wanted very much to see the house. As you know, Wooton is one of the truly great stone houses of the early English Renaissance. Like its sisters, Longleat, Wollaton, and Montacute, it was built in the latter half of the sixteenth Century when for the first time a great man's house could be designed as a comfortable dwelling, not as a castle, and when a new group of architects such as John Thorpe and the Smithsons were starting to do marvellous things all over the country.

It lies south of Oxford, near a small town called Princes Risborough not a long trip from London--and as I swung in through the main gates the sky was closing overhead and the early winter evening was beginning.

I went slowly up the long drive, trying to see as much of the grounds as possible, especially the famous topiary which I had heard such a lot about. And I must say it was an impressive sight. On all sides there were massive yew trees, trimmed and clipped into many different formal shapes--hens, pigeons, bottles, boots, , Armchairs, castles, egg-cups, lanterns, old women with flaring petticoats, tall pillars, some crowned with a ball, others with big rounded roofs and stemless mushroom finials--and in the half darkness the greens had turned to black so that each figure, each tree, took on

a dark, smooth Sculptural quality. At one point I saw a lawn covered with gigantic chessmen, each a live yew tree, marvellously fashioned. I stopped the car, got out and walked among them, and they were twice as tall as me. What's more the set was complete, kings, queens, bishops, knights, rooks and pawns standing in position as for the start of a game.

Around the next bend I saw the great grey house itself, and in front of it the large entrance forecourt enclosed by a high balustraded wall with small pillared pavilions at its outer angles. The piers of the balustrades were surmounted by stone obelisks--the Italian influence on the Tudor mind--and a flight of steps at least a hundred feet wide led up to the house.

As I drove into the forecourt I noticed with rather a shock that the fountain basin in the middle supported a large statue by Epstein. A lovely thing, mind you, but surely not in sympathy with its surroundings. Then, looking back as I climbed the stairway to the front door, I saw that on all the little lawns and terraces round about there were other modern statues and many kinds of curious sculpture. In the distance I thought I recognized Gaudier Brzeska, Brancusi, Saint-Gaudens, Henry Moore, and Epstein again.

The door was opened by a young footman who led me up to a bedroom on the first floor. Her ladyship, he explained, was resting, so were the other guests, but they would all be down in the main drawing-room in an hour or so, dressed for dinner.

Now in my job it is necessary to do a lot of week-ending. I suppose I spend around fifty Saturdays and Sundays a year in other people's houses, and as a result I have become fairly sensitive to unfamiliar atmosphere. I can tell good or bad almost by sniffing with my nose the moment I get in the front door; and this one I was in now I did not like. The place smelled wrong. There was the faint, desiccated whiff of something troublesome in the air; I was conscious of it even as I lay steaming luxuriously in my great marble bath; and I couldn't help hoping that no unpleasant things were going to happen before Monday came.

The first of them--though more of a surprise than an unpleasantness--occurred ten minutes later. I was sitting on the bed putting on my socks when softly the door opened, and an ancient lopsided gnome in black tails slid into the room. He was the butler, he explained, and his name was Jelks, and he did so hope I was comfortable and had everything I wanted.

I told him I was and had.

He said he would do all he could to make my week-end agreeable. I thanked him and waited for him to go. He hesitated, and then, in a voice dripping with unction, he begged permission to mention a rather delicate matter. I told him to go ahead.

To be quite frank, he said, it was about tipping. The whole business of tipping made him acutely miserable.

Oh? And why was that?

Well, if I really wanted to know, he didn't like the idea that his guests felt under an obligation to tip him when they left the house--as indeed they did. It was an undignified proceeding for the tipping and the tipped. Moreover, he was well aware of the anguish that was often created in the minds of guests such as myself, if I would pardon the liberty, who might feel compelled by convention to give more than they could really afford.

He paused, and two small crafty eyes watched my face for a sign. I murmured that he needn't worry himself about such things as far as I was concerned.

On the contrary, he said, he hoped sincerely that I would agree from the beginning to give him no tip at all.

"Well," I said. "Let's not fuss about it now, and when the time comes we'll see how we feel."

"No, sir!" he cried. "Please, I really must insist."

So I agreed.

He thanked me, and shuffled a step or two closer. Then, laying his head on one side and clasping his hands before him like a priest, he gave a tiny apologetic shrug of the shoulders. The small sharp eyes were still watching me, and I waited, one sock on, the other in my hands, trying to guess what was coming next.

All that he would ask, he said softly, so softly now that his voice was like music heard faintly in the street outside a great concert hall, all that he would ask was that instead of a tip I should give him thirty-three and a third per cent of my winnings at cards over the week-end. If I lost there would be nothing to pay. It was all so soft and smooth and sudden that I was not even surprised.

"Do they play a lot of cards, Jeiks?"

"Yes, sir, a great deal."

"Isn't thirty-three and a third a bit steep?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"I'll give you ten per cent."

"No, sir, I couldn't do that." He was now examining the finger-nails of his left hand, and patiently frowning.

"Then we'll make it fifteen. All right?"

"Thirty-three and a third, sir. It's very reasonable. After all, sir, seeing that I don't even know if you are a good player, what I'm actually doing, not meaning to be personal, is backing a horse and I've never even seen it run."

No doubt you think I should never have started bargaining with the butler in the first place, and perhaps you are right. But being a liberal-minded person, I always try my best to be affable with the lower classes. Apart from that, the more I thought about it, the more I had to admit to myself that it w

as an offer no sportsman had the right to reject.

"All right then, Jeiks. As you wish."

"Thank you, sir." He moved towards the door, walking slowly sideways like a crab; but once more he hesitated, a hand on the knob. "If I may give a little advice, sir may I?"

"Yes?"

"It's simply that her ladyship tends to overbid her hand."

Now this was going too far. I was so startled I dropped my sock. After all, it's one thing to have a harmless little sporting arrangement with the butler about tipping, but when he begins conniving with you to take money away from the hostess then it's time to call a halt.

"All right Jeiks. Now that'll do."

"No offence, sir, I hope. All I mean is you're bound to be playing against her ladyship. She always partners Major Haddock."

"Major Haddock? You mean Major Jack Haddock?"

"Yes, sir."

I noticed there was a trace of a sneer around the corner of Jelks's nose when he spoke about this man. And it was worse with Lady Turton. Each time he said 'her ladyship' he spoke the words with the outsides of his lips as though he were nibbling a lemon, and there was a subtle, mocking inflection in his voice.

"You'll excuse me now, sir. Her ladyship will be down at seven o'clock.

So will Major Haddock and the others." He slipped out of the door leaving behind him a certain dampness in the room and a faint smell of embrocation.

Shortly after seven, I found my way to the main drawing-room, and Lady Turton, as beautiful as ever, got up to greet me.

"I wasn't even sure you were coming," she said in that peculiar lilting voice. "What's your name again?"

"I'm afraid I took you at your word, Lady Turton. I hope it's all right."

"Why not?" she said. "There's forty-seven bedrooms in the house. This is my husband." A small man came around the back of her and said, "You know, I'm so glad you were able to come." He had a lovely warm smile and when he took my hand I felt instantly a touch of friendship in his fingers.

"And Carmen La Rosa," Lady Turton said.

This was a powerfully built woman who looked as though she might have something to do with horses. She nodded at me, and although my hand was already half-way out she didn't give me hers, thus forcing me to convert the movement into a noseblow.

"You have a cold?" she said. "I'm sorry."

I did not like this Miss Carmen La Rosa.

"And this is Jack Haddock."

I knew this man slightly. He was a director of companies (whatever that

may mean), and a well-known member of society. I had used his name a few times in my column, but I had never liked him, and this I think was mainly because I have a deep suspicion of all people who carry their military titles back with them into private life--especially majors and colonels. Standing there in his dinner-jacket with his full-blooded animal face and black eye brows and large white teeth, he looked so handsome there was almost something indecent about it. He had a way of raising his upper lip when he smiled, baring his teeth, and he was smiling now as he gave me a hairy brown hand.

"I hope you're going to say some nice things about us in your column."

"He better had," Lady Turton said, "or I'll say some nasty ones about him on my front page."

I laughed, but all three of them, Lady Turton, Major Haddock, and Carmen La Rosa had already turned away and were settling themselves back on the sofa. Jelks gave me a drink, and Sir Basil drew me gently aside for a quiet chat at the other end of the room. Every now and then Lady Turton would call her husband to fetch her something--another Martini, a cigarette, an ash tray, a handkerchief--and he, half rising from his chair, would be forestalled by the watchful Jelks who fetched it for him.

Clearly, Jeiks loved his master; and just as clearly he hated the wife. Each time he did something for her he made a little sneer with his nose and drew his lips together so they puckered like a turkey's bottom.

At dinner, our hostess sat her two friends, Haddock and La Rosa, on either side of her. This unconventional arrangement left Sir Basil and me at the other end of the table where we were able to continue our pleasant talk about painting and sculpture. Of course it was obvious to me by now that the Major was infatuated with her ladyship. And again, although I hate to say it, it seemed as though the La Rosa woman was hunting the same bird.

All this foolishness appeared to delight the hostess. But it did not delight her husband. I could see that he was conscious of the little scene all the time we were talking; and often his mind would wander from our subject and he would stop short in mid-sentence, his eyes travelling down to the other end of the table to settle pathetically for a moment on that lovely head with the black hair and the curiously flaring nostrils. He must have noticed then how exhilarated she was, how the hand that gestured as she spoke rested every now and again on the Major's arm, and how the other woman, the one who perhaps had something to do with horses, kept saying, "Nata-li-a? Now Nata-li-a, listen to me!"

"Tomorrow," I said, "you must take me round and show me the sculptures you've put up in the garden."

"Of course," he said, "with pleasure." He glanced again at the wife, and his eyes had a sort of supplicating look that was piteous beyond words. He was so mild and passive a man in every way that even now I could see ther

e was no anger in him, no danger, no chance of an explosion.

After dinner I was ordered straight to the card table to partner Miss Carmen La Rosa against Major Haddock and Lady Turton. Sir Basil sat quietly on the sofa with a book.

There was nothing unusual about the game itself; it was routine and rather dull. But Jeiks was a nuisance. All evening he prowled around us, emptying ashtrays and asking about drinks and peering at our hands. He was obviously short-sighted and I doubt whether he saw much of what was going on because as you may or may not know, here in England no butler has ever been permitted to wear spectacles nor for that matter, a moustache. This is the golden, unbreakable rule and a very sensible one it is too, although I'm not quite sure what lies behind it. I presume that a moustache would make him look too much like a gentleman, and spectacles too much like an American, and where would we be then I should like to know? In any event Jelks was a nuisance all evening; and so was Lady Turton who was constantly called to the phone on newspaper business.

At eleven o'clock she looked up from her cards and said, "Basil, it's time you went to bed."

"Yes, my dear, perhaps it is." He closed the book, got up, and stood for a minute watching the play. "Are you having a good game?" he asked.

The others didn't answer him so I said, "It's a nice game."

"I'm so glad. And Jeiks will look after you and get anything you want."

"Jelks can go to bed too," the wife said.

I could hear Major Haddock breathing through his nose beside me, and the soft drop of the cards one by one on to the table, and then the sound of Jeik's feet shuffling over the carpet towards us.

"You wouldn't prefer me to stay, m'lady?"

"No. Go to bed. You too, Basil."

"Yes, my dear. Good night. Good night all."

Jeiks opened the door for him, and he went slowly out followed by the butler.

As soon as the next rubber was over, I said that I too wanted to go to bed.

"All right," Lady Turton said. "Good night."

I went up to my room, locked the door, took a pill, and went to sleep.

The next morning, Sunday, I got up and dressed around ten o'clock and went down to the breakfast-room. Sir Basil was there before me, and Jeiks was serving him with grilled kidneys and bacon and fried tomatoes. He was delighted to see me and suggested that as soon as we had finished eating we should take a long walk around the grounds. I told him nothing would give me more pleasure.

Half an hour later we started out, and you've no idea what a relief it w

as to get away from that house and into the open air. It was one of those warm shining days that come occasionally in mid-winter after a night of heavy rain, with a bright surprising sun and not a breath of wind. Bare trees seemed beautiful in the sunlight, water still dripping from the branches, and wet places all around were sparkling with diamonds. The sky had small faint clouds.

"What a lovely day!"

"Yes--isn't it a lovely day!"

We spoke hardly another word during the walk; it wasn't necessary. But he took me everywhere and I saw it all--the huge chessmen and all the rest of the topiary. The elaborate garden houses, the pools, the fountains, the children's maze whose hedges were hornbeam and lime so that it was only good in summer when the leaves were out, and the parterres, the rockeries, the greenhouses with their vines and nectarine trees. And of course, the sculpture. Most of the contemporary European sculptors were there, in bronze, granite, limestone, and wood; and although it was a pleasure to see them warming and glowing in the sun, to me they still looked a trifle out of place in these vast formal surroundings.

"Shall we rest here now a little while?" Sir Basil said after we had walked for more than half an hour. So we sat down on a white bench beside a water-lily pond full of carp and goldfish, and lit cigarettes. We were some way from the house, on a piece of ground that was raised above its surroundings, and from where we sat the gardens were spread out below us like a drawing in one of those old books on garden architecture, with the hedges and lawns and terraces and fountains making a pretty pattern of squares and rings.

"My father bought this place just before I was born," Sir Basil said. "I've lived here ever since, and I know every inch of it. Each day I grow to love it more."

"It must be wonderful in summer."

"Oh, but it is. You should come down and see it in May and June. Will you promise to do that?"

"Of course," I said. "I'd love to come," and as I spoke I was watching the figure of a woman dressed in red moving among the flower-beds in the far distance. I saw her cross over a wide expanse of lawn, and there was a lilt in her walk, a little shadow attending her, and when she was over the lawn, she turned left and went along one side of a high wall of clipped yew until she came to another smaller lawn that was circular and had in its centre a piece of sculpture.

"This garden is younger than the house," Sir Basil said. "It was laid out early in the eighteenth century by a Frenchman called Beaumont, the same fellow who did Levens, in Westmorland. For at least a year he had two hundred and fifty men working on it."

The woman in the red dress had been joined now by a man, and they were standing face to face, about a yard apart, in the very centre of the whole garden panorama, on this little circular patch of lawn, apparently conversing. The man had some small black object in his hand.

"If you're interested I'll show you the bills that Beaumont put in to the Duke while he was making it."

"I'd like very much to see them. They must be fascinating."

"He paid his labourers a shilling a day and they worked ten hours."

In the clear sunlight it was not difficult to follow the movements and gestures of the two figures on the lawn. They had turned now towards the piece of sculpture, and were pointing at it in a sort of mocking way, apparently laughing and making jokes about its shape. I recognized it as being one of the Henry Moores, done in wood, a thin smooth object of singular beauty that had two or three holes in it and a number of strange limbs protruding.

"When Beaumont planted the yew trees for the chess-men and the other things, he knew they wouldn't amount to much for at least a hundred years. We don't seem to possess that sort of patience in our planning these days, do we? What do you think?"

"No," I said. "We don't."

The black object in the man's hand turned out to be a camera, and now he had stepped back and was taking pictures of the woman beside the Henry Moore. She was striking a number of different poses, all of them, so far as I could see, ludicrous and meant to be amusing. Once she put her arms around one of the protruding wooden limbs and hugged it, and another time she climbed up and sat side-saddle on the thing, holding imaginary reins in her hands. A great wall of yew hid these two people from the house, and indeed from all the rest of the garden except the little hill on which we sat. They had every right to believe they were not overlooked, and even if they had happened to glance our way--which was into the sun--I doubt whether they would have noticed the two small motionless figures sitting on the bench beside the pond.

"You know, I love these yews." Sir Basil said. "The colour of them is so wonderful in a garden because it rests the eye. And in the summer it breaks up the areas of brilliance into little patches and makes them more comfortable to admire. Have you noticed the different shades of greens on the planes and facets of each clipped tree?"

"It's lovely, isn't it."

The man now seemed to be explaining something to the woman, and pointing at the Henry Moore, and I could tell by the way they threw back their heads that they were laughing again. The man continued to point, and then the woman walked around the back of the wood carving, bent down and poked her head through one of its holes. The thing was about the size, shall I say, of

a small horse, but thinner than that, and from where I sat I could see both sides of it--to the left, the woman's body, to the right, her head protruding through. It was very much like one of those jokes at the seaside where you put your head through a hole in a board and get photographed as a fat lady. The man was photographing her now.

"There's another thing about yews," Sir Basil said. "In the early summer when the young shoots come out..." At that moment he paused and sat up straighter and leaned slightly forward, and I could sense his whole body suddenly stiffening.

"Yes," I said, "when the young shoots come out?"

The man had taken the photograph, but the woman still had her head through the hole, and now I saw him put both hands (as well as the camera) behind his back and advance towards her. Then he bent forward so his face was close to hers, touching it, and he held it there while he gave her, I suppose, a few kisses or something like that. In the stillness that followed, I fancied I heard a faint faraway tinkle of female laughter coming to us through the sunlight across the garden.

"Shall we go back to the house?" I asked.

"Back to the house?"

"Yes, shall we go back and have a drink before lunch?"

"A drink? Yes, we'll have a drink." But he didn't move. He sat very still, gone far away from me now, staring intently at the two figures. I also was staring at them. I couldn't take my eyes away; I had to look. It was like seeing a dangerous little ballet in miniature from a great distance, and you knew the dancers and the music but not the end of the story, not the choreography, nor what they were going to do next, and you were fascinated, and you had to look.

"Gaudier Brzeska," I said. "How great do you think he might've become if he hadn't died so young?"

"Who?"

"Gaudier Brzeska."

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

I noticed now that something queer was happening. The woman still had her head through the hole, but she was beginning to wriggle her body from side to side in a slow unusual manner, and the man was standing motionless, a pace or so away watching her. He seemed suddenly uneasy the way he stood there, and I could tell by the drop of the head and by the stiff intent set of the body that there was no laughter in him any more. For a while he remained still, then I saw him place his camera on the ground and go forward to the woman, taking her head in his hands; and all at once it was more like a puppet show than a ballet, with tiny wooden figures performing tiny, jerk movements, crazy and unreal, on a faraway sunlit stage. We sat quietly to

gether on the white bench, and we watched while the tiny puppet man began to manipulate the woman's head with his hands. He was doing it gently, there was no doubt about that, slowly and gently, stepping back every now and then to think about it some more, and several times crouching down to survey the situation from another angle. Whenever he left her alone the woman would start to wriggle her body, and the peculiar way she did it reminded me of a dog that feels a collar round its neck for the first time.

"She's stuck," Sir Basil said.

And now the man was walking to the other side of the carving, the side where the woman's body was, and he put out his hands and began trying to do something with her neck. Then, as though suddenly exasperated, he gave the neck two or three jerky pulls, and this time the sound of a woman's voice, raised high in anger, or pain, or both, came back to us small and clear through the sunlight.

Out of the corner of one eye I could see Sir Basil nodding his head quietly up and down. "I got my fist caught in a jar of boiled sweets once," he said, "and I couldn't get it out."

The man retreated a few yards, and was standing with hands on hips, head up, looking furious and sullen. The woman, from her uncomfortable position, appeared to be talking to him, or rather shouting at him, and although the body itself was pretty firmly fixed and could only wriggle, the legs were free and did a good deal of moving and stamping. "I broke the jar with a hammer and told my mother I'd knocked it off the shelf by mistake." He seemed calmer now, not tense at all, although his voice was curiously flat. "I suppose we'd better go down and see if we can help."

"Perhaps we should."

But still he didn't move. He took out a cigarette and lit it, putting the used match carefully back in the box.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Will you have one?"

"Thanks, I think I will." He made a little ceremony of giving me the cigarette and lighting it for me, and again he put the used match back in the box. Then we got up and walked slowly down the grass slope.

We came upon them silently, through an archway in the yew hedge, and it was naturally quite a surprise.

"What's the matter here?" Sir Basil asked. He spoke softly, with a dangerous softness that I'm sure his wife had never heard before.

"She's gone and put her head through the hole and now she can't get it out," Major Haddock said. "Just for a lark, you know."

"For a what?"

"Basil!" Lady Turton shouted, "Don't be such a damn fool! Do something, can't you!" She may not have been able to move much, but she could still talk.

"Pretty obvious we're going to have to break up this lump of wood," the Major said. There was a small smudge of red on his grey moustache, and this, like the single extra touch of colour that ruins a perfect painting, managed somehow to destroy all his manly looks. It made him comic.

"You mean break the Henry Moore?"

"My dear sir, there is no other way of setting the lady free. God knows how she managed to squeeze it in, but I know for a fact that she can't pull it out. It's the ears get in the way."

"Oh dear," Sir Basil said. "What a terrible pity. My beautiful Henry Moore."

At this stage Lady Turton began abusing her husband in a most unpleasant manner, and there's no knowing how long it would have gone on had not Jelks suddenly appeared out of the shadows. He came sidling silently on to the lawn and stationed himself at a respectful distance from Sir Basil, as though awaiting instructions. His black clothes looked perfectly ridiculous in the morning sunlight, and with his ancient pink-white face and white hands he was like some small crabby animal that has lived all its life in a hole under the ground.

"Is there anything I can do, Sir Basil?" He kept his voice level, but I didn't think his face was quite straight. When he looked at Lady Turton there was a little exulting glimmer in his eyes.

"Yes Jelks, there is. Go back and get me a saw or something so I can cut out this section of wood."

"Shall I call one of the men, Sir Basil? William is a good carpenter."

"No, I'll do it myself. Just get the tools and hurry."

While they were waiting for Jelks, I strolled away because I didn't want to hear any more of the things that Lady Turton was saying to her husband. But I was back in time to see the butler returning, followed now by the other woman, Carmen La Rosa, who made a rush for the hostess.

"Nata-Ji-a! My dear Nata-li-a! What have they done to you?"

"Oh shut up," the hostess said. "And get out of the way, will you."

Sir Basil took up a position close to his lady's head, waiting for Jelks. Jelks advanced slowly, carrying a saw in one hand, an axe in the other, and he stopped maybe a yard away. Then he held out both implements in front of him so his master could choose, and there was a brief moment--no more than two or three seconds--of silence, and of waiting, and it just happened that I was watching Jelks at this time. I saw the hand that was carrying the axe come forward an extra fraction of an inch towards Sir Basil. It was so slight a movement it was barely noticeable--a tiny pushing forward of the hand, slow and secret, a little offer, a little coaxing offer that was accompanied perhaps by an infinitesimal lift of the eyebrow.

I'm not sure whether Sir Basil saw it, but he hesitated, and again the h

and that held the axe came edging forward, and it was almost exactly like the card trick where the man says 'Take one, whichever one you want,' and you always get the one he means you to have. Sir Basil got the axe. I saw him reach out in a dreamy sort of way, accepting it from Jeiks, and then, the instant he felt the handle in his grasp he seemed to realize what was required of him and he sprang to life.

For me, after that, it was like the awful moment when you see a child running out into the road and a car is coming and all you can do is shut your eyes tight and wait until the noise tells you it has happened. The moment of waiting becomes a long lucid period of time with yellow and red spots dancing on a black field, and even if you open your eyes again and find that nobody has been killed or hurt, it makes no difference because so far as you and your stomach were concerned you saw it all.

I saw this one all right, every detail of it, and I didn't open my eyes again until I heard Sir Basil's voice, even softer than usual, calling in gentle protest to the butler.

"Jeiks," he was saying, and I looked and saw him standing there as calm as you please, still holding the axe. Lady Turton's head was there too, still sticking through the hole, but her face had turned a terrible ashy grey, and the mouth was opening and shutting making a kind of gurgling sound.

"Look here, Jeiks," Sir Basil was saying. "What on earth are you thinking about. This thing's much too dangerous. Give me the saw." And as he exchanged implements I noticed for the first time two little warm roses of colour appearing on his cheeks, and above them, all around the corners of his eyes, the twinkling tiny wrinkles of a smile.

The Sound Machine

IT was a warm summer evening and Klausner walked quickly through the front gate and around the side of the house and into the garden at the back. He went on down the garden until he came to a wooden shed and he unlocked the door, went inside and closed the door behind him.

The interior of the shed was an unpainted room. Against one wall, on the left, there was a long wooden workbench, and on it, among a littering of wires and batteries and small sharp tools, there stood a black box about three feet long, the shape of a child's coffin.

Klausner moved across the room to the box. The top of the box was open, and he bent down and began to poke and peer inside it among a mass of different-coloured wires and silver tubes. He picked up a piece of paper that lay beside the box, studied it carefully, put it down, peered inside the box and

started running his fingers along the wires, tugging gently at them to test the connections, glancing back at the paper, then into the box, then at the paper again, checking each wire. He did this for perhaps an hour.

Then he put a hand around to the front of the box where there were three dials, and he began to twiddle them, watching at the same time the movement of the mechanism inside the box. All the while he kept speaking softly to himself, nodding his head, smiling sometimes, his hands always moving, the fingers moving swiftly, deftly, inside the box, his mouth twisting into curious shapes when a thing was delicate or difficult to do, saying, "Yes... Yes.. . And now this one... Yes... Yes. But is this right? Is it--where's my diagram?... Ah, yes... Of course... Yes, yes... That's right... And now... Good.. . Good... Yes Yes, yes, yes." His concentration was intense; his movements were quick; there was an air of urgency about the way he worked, of breathlessness, of strong suppressed excitement.

Suddenly he heard footsteps on the gravel path outside and he straightened and turned swiftly as the door opened and a tall man came in. It was Scott. It was only Scott, the doctor.

"Well, well, well," the Doctor said. "So this is where you hide yourself in the evenings."

"Hullo, Scott," Klausner said.

"I happened to be passing," the Doctor told him, "so I dropped in to see how you were. There was no one in the house, so I came on down here. How's that throat of yours been behaving?"

"It's all right. It's fine."

"Now I'm here I might as well have a look at it."

"Please don't trouble. I'm quite cured. I'm fine."

The Doctor began to feel the tension in the room. He looked at the black box on the bench; then he looked at the man. "You've got your hat on)" he said. "Oh, have I?" Klausner reached up, removed the hat and put it on the bench.

The Doctor came up closer and bent down to look into the box. "What's this?" he said. "Making a radio?"

"No, just fooling around."

"It's got rather complicated looking innards."

"Yes." Klausner seemed tense and distracted.

"What is it?" the Doctor asked. "It's rather a frightening-looking thing, isn't it?"

"It's just an idea."

"Yes?"

"It has to do with sound, that's all."

"Good heavens, man! Don't you get enough of that sort of thing all day in your work?"

"I like sound."

"So it seems." The Doctor went to the door, turned, and said, "Well, I won't disturb you. Glad your throat's not worrying you any more." But he kept standing there looking at the box, intrigued by the remarkable complexity of its inside, curious to know what this strange patient of his was up to. "What's it really for?" he asked. "You've made me inquisitive."

Klausner looked down at the box, then at the Doctor, and he reached up and began gently to scratch the lobe of his right ear. There was a pause. The Doctor stood by the door, waiting, smiling.

"All right, I'll tell you, if you're interested." There was another pause, and the Doctor could see that Klausner was having trouble about how to begin.

He was shifting from one foot to the other, tugging at the lobe of his ear, looking at his feet, and then at last, slowly, he said. "Well, it's like this. .. the theory is very simple really. The human ear... you know that it can't hear everything. There are sounds that are so low-pitched or so high-pitched that it can't hear them."

"Yes," the Doctor said. "Yes."

"Well, speaking very roughly any note so high that it has more than fifteen thousand vibrations a second--we can't hear it. Dogs have better ears than us. You know you can buy a whistle whose note is so high-pitched that you can't hear it at all. But a dog can hear it."

"Yes, I've seen one," the Doctor said.

"Of course you have. And up the scale, higher than the note of that whistle, there is another note--a vibration if you like, but I prefer to think of it as a note. You can't hear that one either. And above that there is another and another rising right up the scale for ever and ever and ever, an endless succession of notes an infinity of notes... there is a note--if only our ears could hear it--so high that it vibrates a million times a second... and another a million times as high as that... and on and on, higher and higher, as far as numbers go, which is... infinity... eternity... beyond the stars."

Klausner was becoming more animated every Moment. He was a frail man, nervous and twitchy, with always moving hands. His large head inclined towards his left shoulder as though his neck were not quite strong enough to support it rigidly. His face was smooth and pale, almost white, and the pale-grey eyes that blinked and peered from behind a pair of steel spectacles were bewildered, unfocused, remote. He was a frail, nervous, twitchy little man, a moth of a man, dreamy and distracted; suddenly fluttering and animated; and now the Doctor, looking at that strange pale face and those pale-grey eyes, felt that somehow there was about this little person a quality of distance, of immense immeasurable distance, as though the mind were far away from where the body was.

The Doctor waited for him to go on. Klausner sighed and clasped his hand

s tightly together. "I believe," he said, speaking more slowly now, "that there is a whole world of sound about us all the time that we cannot hear. It is possible that up there in those high-pitched inaudible regions there is a new exciting music being made, with subtle harmonies and fierce grinding discords, a music so powerful that it would drive us mad if only our ears were tuned to hear the sound of it. There may be anything... for all we know there may--" "Yes," the Doctor said. "But it's not very probable."

"Why not? Why not?" Klausner pointed to a fly sitting on a small roll of copper wire on the workbench. "You see that fly? What sort of noise is that fly making now? None--that one can hear. But for all we know the creature may be whistling like mad on a very high note, or barking or croaking or singing a song. It's got a mouth, hasn't it? It's got a throat?" The Doctor looked at the fly and he smiled. He was still standing by the door with his hands on the doorknob. "Well," he said. "So you're going to check up on that?"

„Some time ago," Klausner said, "I made a simple instrument that proved to me the existence of many odd inaudible sounds. Often I have sat and watched the needle of my instrument recording the presence of sound vibrations in the air when I myself could hear nothing. And those are the sounds I want to listen to. I want to know where they come from and who or what is making them."

"And that machine on the table there," the Doctor said, "is that going to allow you to hear these noises?"

"It may. Who knows? So far, I've had no luck. But I've made some changes in it and tonight I'm ready for another trial. This machine," he said, touching it with his hands, "is designed to pick up sound vibrations that are too high pitched for reception by the human ear, and to convert them to a scale of audible tones. I tune it in, almost like a radio."

"How d'you mean?"

"It isn't complicated. Say I wish to listen to the squeak of a bat. That's a fairly high-pitched sound--about thirty thousand vibrations a second. The average human ear can't quite hear it. Now, if there were a bat flying around this room and I tuned in to thirty thousand on my machine, I would hear the squeaking of that bat very clearly. I would even hear the correct note F sharp, or B flat, or whatever it might be--but merely at a much lower pitch. Don't you understand?"

The Doctor looked at the long, black coffinbox. "And you're going to try it tonight?"

"Yes."

"Well, I wish you luck." He glanced at his watch. "My goodness!" he said. "I must fly. Good-bye, and thank you for telling me. I must call again sometime and find out what happened." The Doctor went out and closed the door behind him.

For a while longer, Klausner fussed about with the wires in the black box; then he straightened up and in a soft excited whisper said, "Now we'll try again... We'll take it out into the garden this time... and then perhaps perhaps... the reception will be better. Lift it up now... carefully... Oh, my God, it's heavy!" He carried the box to the door, found that he couldn't open the door without putting it down, carried it back, put it on the bench, opened the door, and then carried it with some difficulty into the garden. He placed the box carefully on a small wooden table that stood on the lawn. He returned to the shed and fetched a pair of earphones. He plugged the wire connections from the earphones into the machine and put the earphones over his ears. The movements of his hands were quick and precise. He was excited, and breathed loudly and quickly through his mouth. He kept on talking to himself with little words of comfort and encouragement, as though he were afraid--afraid that the machine might not work and afraid also of what might happen if it did.

He stood there in the garden beside the wooden table, so pale, small, and thin that he looked like an ancient, consumptive, bespectacled child. The sun had gone down. There was no wind, no sound at all. From where he stood, he could see over a low fence into the next garden, and there was a woman walking down the garden with a flower-basket on her arm. He watched her for a while without thinking about her at all. Then he turned to the box on the table and pressed a switch on its front. He put his left hand on the volume control and his right hand on the knob that moved a needle across a large central dial, like the wavelength dial of a radio. The dial was marked with many numbers, in a series of bands, starting at 15,000 and going on up to 1,000,000.

And now he was bending forward over the machine. His head was cocked to one side in a tense, listening attitude. His right hand was beginning to turn the knob. The needle was travelling slowly across the dial, so slowly he could hardly see it move, and in the earphones he could hear a faint, spasmodic crackling.

Behind this crackling sound he could hear a distant humming tone which was the noise of the machine itself, but that was all. As he listened, he became conscious of a curious sensation, a feeling that his ears were stretching out away from his head, that each ear was connected to his head by a thin stiff wire, like a tentacle, and that the wires were lengthening, that the ears were going up and up towards a secret and forbidden territory, a dangerous ultrasonic region where ears had never been before and had no right to be.

The little needle crept slowly across the dial, and suddenly he heard a shriek, a frightful piercing shriek, and he jumped and dropped his hands, catching hold of the edge of the table. He stared around him as if expecting to see the person who had shrieked. There was no one in sight except the woman

n in the garden next door, and it was certainly not she. She was bending down, cutting yellow roses and putting them in her basket.

Again it came--a throatless, inhuman shriek, sharp and short, very clear and cold. The note itself possessed a minor, metallic quality that he had never heard before. Klausner looked around him, searching instinctively for the source of the noise. The woman next door was the only living thing in sight. He saw her reach down; take a rose stem in the fingers of one hand and snip the stem with a pair of scissors. Again he heard the scream.

It came at the exact moment when the rose stem was cut.

At this point, the woman straightened up, put the scissors in the basket with the roses and turned to walk away.

"Mrs Saunders!" Klausner shouted, his voice shrill with excitement. "Oh, Mrs Saunders!"

And looking round, the woman saw her neighbour standing on his lawn--a fantastic, arm-waving little person with a pair of earphones on his head--calling to her in a voice so high and loud that she became alarmed.

"Cut another one! Please cut another one quickly!"

She stood still, staring at him. "Why, Mr Klausner," she said. "What's the matter?"

"Please do as I ask," he said. "Cut just one more rose!"

Mrs Saunders had always believed her neighbour to be a rather peculiar person; now it seemed that he had gone completely crazy. She wondered whether she should run into the house and fetch her husband. No, she thought. No, he's harmless. I'll just humour him. "Certainly, Mr Klausner, if you like," she said. She took her scissors from the basket, bent down and snipped another rose.

Again Klausner heard that frightful, throatless shriek in the earphones; again it came at the exact moment the rose stem was cut. He took off the earphones and ran to the fence that separated the two gardens. "All right," he said. "That's enough. No more. Please, no more."

The woman stood there, a yellow rose in one hand, clippers in the other, looking at him.

"I'm going to tell you something, Mrs Saunders," he said, "something that you won't believe." He put his hands on top of the fence and peered at her intently through his thick spectacles. "You have, this evening, cut a basketful of roses. You have with a sharp pair of scissors cut through the stems of living things, and each rose that you cut screamed in the most terrible way. Did you know that, Mrs Saunders?"

"No," she said. "I certainly didn't know that."

"It happens to be true," he said. He was breathing rather rapidly, but he was trying to control his excitement. "I heard them shrieking. Each time you cut one, I heard the cry of pain. A very high-pitched sound, approximately

y one hundred and thirty-two thousand vibrations a second. You couldn't possibly have heard it yourself. But I heard it."

"Did you really, Mr Klausner?" She decided she would make a dash for the house in about five seconds.

"You might say," he went on, "that a rose bush has no nervous system to feel with, no throat to cry with. You'd be right. It hasn't. Not like ours, anyway. But how do you know, Mrs Saunders"--and here he leaned far over the fence and spoke in a fierce whisper "how do you know that a rose bush doesn't feel as much pain when someone cuts its stem in two as you would feel if someone cut your wrist off with a garden shears? How do you know that? It's alive, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr Klausner. Oh, yes and good night." Quickly she turned and ran up the garden to her house. Klausner went back to the table. He put on the earphones and stood for a while listening. He could still hear the faint crackling sound and the humming noise of the machine, but nothing more. He bent down and took hold of a small white daisy growing on the lawn. He took it between thumb and forefinger and slowly pulled it upward and sideways until the stem broke.

From the moment that he started pulling to the moment when the stem broke, he heard--he distinctly heard in the earphones--a faint high-pitched cry, curiously inanimate. He took another daisy and did it again. Once more he heard the cry, but he wasn't sure now that it expressed pain. No, it wasn't pain; it was surprise. Or was it? It didn't really express any of the feelings or emotions known to a human being. It was just a cry, a neutral, stony cry--a single emotionless note, expressing nothing. It had been the same with the roses. He had been wrong in calling it a cry of pain. A flower probably didn't feel pain. It felt something else which we didn't know about--something called tom or spun or plinuckment, or anything you like.

He stood up and removed the earphones. It was getting dark and he could see pricks of light shining in the windows of the houses all around him. Carefully he picked up the black box from the table, carried it into the shed and put it on the workbench. Then he went out, locked the door behind him and walked up to the house.

The next morning Klausner was up as soon as it was light. He dressed and went straight to the shed. He picked up the machine and carried it outside, clasping it to his chest with both hands, walking unsteadily under its weight. He went past the house, out through the front gate, and across the road to the park. There he paused and looked around him; then he went on until he came to a large tree, a beech tree, and he placed the machine on the ground close to the trunk of the tree. Quickly he went back to the house and got an axe from the coal cellar and carried it across the road into the park. He put the axe on the ground beside the tree. Then he looked around him again,

peering nervously through his thick glasses in every direction. There was no one about. It was six in the morning.

He put the earphones on his head and switched on the machine. He listened for a moment to the faint familiar humming sound; then he picked up the axe, took a stance with his legs wide apart and swung the axe as hard as he could at the base of the tree trunk. The blade cut deep into the wood and stuck there, and at the instant of impact he heard a most extraordinary noise in the earphones. It was a new noise, unlike any he had heard before--a harsh, noteless, enormous noise, a growling, lowpitched, screaming sound, not quick and short like the noise of the roses, but drawn out like a sob lasting for fully a minute, loudest at the moment when the axe struck, fading gradually fainter and fainter until it was gone.

Klausner stared in horror at the place where the blade of the axe had sunk into the woodflesh of the tree; then gently he took the axe handle, worked the blade loose and threw the thing to the ground. With his fingers he touched the gash that the axe had made in the wood, touching the edges of the gash, trying to press them together to close the wound, and he kept saying, "Tree... oh, tree... I am sorry I am sorry... but it will heal... it will heal fine."

For a while he stood there with his hands upon the trunk of the great tree; then suddenly he turned away and hurried off out of the park, across the road, through the front gate and back into his house. He went to the telephone, consulted the book, dialled a number and waited. He held the receiver tightly in his left hand and tapped the table impatiently with his right. He heard the telephone buzzing at the other end, and then the click of a lifted receiver and a man's voice, a sleepy voice, saying: "Hullo. Yes."

"Dr Scott?" he said.

"Yes. Speaking."

"Dr Scott. You must come at once--quickly, please."

"Who is it speaking?"

"Klausner here, and you remember what I told you last night about my experience with sound, and how I hoped I might-- "Yes, yes, of course, but what's the matter? Are you ill?"

"No, I'm not ill, but-- "It's half-past six in the morning," the Doctor said, "and you call me but you are not ill."

"Please come. Come quickly. I want someone to hear it. It's driving me mad! I can't believe it... The Doctor heard the frantic, almost hysterical note in the man's voice, the same note he was used to hearing in the voices of people who called up and said, "There's been an accident. Come quickly." He said slowly. "You really want me to get out of bed and come over now?"

"Yes, now. At once, please."

"All right, then--I'll come."

Klausner sat down beside the telephone and waited. He tried to remember

what the shriek of the tree had sounded like, but he couldn't. He could remember only that it had been enormous and frightful and that it had made him feel sick with horror. He tried to imagine what sort of noise a human would make if he had to stand anchored to the ground while someone deliberately swung a small sharp thing at his leg so that the blade cut in deep and wedged itself in the cut. Same sort of noise perhaps? No. Quite different. The noise of the tree was worse than any known human noise because of that frightening, toneless, throatless quality. He began to wonder about other living things, and he thought immediately of a field of wheat standing up straight and yellow and alive, with the mower going through it, cutting the stems, five hundred stems a second, every second. Oh, my God, what would that noise be like? Five hundred wheat plants screaming together and every second another five hundred being cut and screaming and no, he thought, I do not want to go to a wheat field with my machine. I would never eat bread after that. But what about potatoes and cabbages and carrots and onions? And what about apples? Ah, no. Apples are all right. They fall off naturally when they are ripe. Apples are all right if you let them fall off instead of tearing them from the tree branch. But not vegetables. Not a potato for example. A potato would surely shriek; so would a carrot and an onion and a cabbage.

He heard the click of the front-gate latch and he jumped up and went out and saw the tall doctor coming down the path, little black bag in hand.

"Well," the Doctor said. "Well, what's all the trouble?"

"Come with me, Doctor, I want you to hear it. I called you because you're the only one I've told. It's over the road in the park. Will you come now?"

The Doctor looked at him. He seemed calmer now. There was no sign of madness or hysteria; he was merely disturbed and excited.

They went across the road into the park and Klausner led the way to the great beech tree at the foot of which stood the long black coffin-box of the machine--and the axe.

"Why did you bring it out here?" the Doctor asked.

"I wanted a tree. There aren't any big trees in the garden."

"And why the axe?"

"You'll see in a moment. But now please put on these earphones and listen. Listen carefully and tell me afterwards precisely what you hear. I want to make quite sure..."

The Doctor smiled and took the earphones and put them over his ears.

Klausner bent down and flicked the switch on the panel of the machine; then he picked up the axe and took his stance with his legs apart, ready to swing. For a moment he paused.

"Can you hear anything?" he said to the Doctor.

"Can I what?"

"Can you hear anything?"

"Just a humming noise."

Klausner stood there with the axe in his hands trying to bring himself to swing, but the thought of the noise that the tree would make made him pause again.

"What are you waiting for?" the Doctor asked.

"Nothing," Klausner answered, and then lifted the axe and swung it at the tree, and as he swung, he thought he felt, he could swear he felt a movement of the ground on which he stood. He felt a slight shifting of the earth beneath his feet as though the roots of the tree were moving underneath the soil, but it was too late to check the blow and the axe blade struck the tree and wedged deep into the wood. At that moment, high overhead, there was the cracking sound of wood splintering and the swishing sound of leaves brushing against other leaves and they both looked up and the Doctor cried, "Watch out! Run, man! Quickly, run!"

The Doctor had ripped off the earphones and was running away fast, but Klausner stood spellbound, staring up at the great branch, sixty feet long at least, that was bending slowly downward, breaking and crackling and splintering at its thickest point, where it joined the main trunk of the tree. The branch came crashing down and Klausner leapt aside just in time. It fell upon the machine and smashed it into pieces.

"Great heavens!" shouted the Doctor as he came running back. "That was a near one! I thought it had got you!"

Klausner was staring at the tree. His large head was leaning to one side and upon his smooth white face there was a tense, horrified expression. Slowly he walked up to the tree and gently he prised the blade loose from the trunk.

"Did you hear it?" he said, turning to the Doctor. His voice was barely audible.

The Doctor was still out of breath from running and the excitement. "Hear what?"

"In the earphones. Did you hear anything when the axe struck?"

The Doctor began to rub the back of his neck. "Well," he said, "as a matter of fact..." He paused and frowned and bit his lower lip. "No, I'm not sure. I couldn't be sure. I don't suppose I had the earphones on for more than a second after the axe struck."

"Yes, yes, but what did you hear?"

"I don't know," the Doctor said. "I don't know what I heard. Probably the noise of the branch breaking." He was speaking rapidly, rather irritably.

"What did it sound like?" Klausner leaned forward slightly, staring hard at the Doctor. "Exactly what. Did it sound like?"

"Oh hell!" the Doctor said, "I really don't know. I was more interested in getting out of the way. Let's leave it."

"Dr Scott, what-did-it-sound-like?"

"For God's sake, how could I tell, what with half the tree falling on me and having to run for my life?" The Doctor certainly seemed nervous. Klausner had sensed it now. He stood quite still, staring at the Doctor and for fully half a minute he didn't speak. The Doctor moved his feet, shrugged his shoulders and half turned to go. "Well," he said, "we'd better get back."

"Look," said the little man, and now his smooth white face became suddenly suffused with colour. "Look," he said, "you stitch this up." He pointed to the last gash that the axe had made in the tree trunk. "You stitch this up quickly."

"Don't be silly," the Doctor said.

"You do as I say. Stitch it up." Klausner was gripping the axe handle and he spoke softly, in a curious, almost a threatening tone.

"Don't be silly," the Doctor said. "I can't stitch through wood. Come on. Let's get back."

"So you can't stitch through wood?"

"No, of course not."

"Have you got any iodine in your bag?"

"What if I have?"

"Then paint the cut with iodine. It'll sting, but that can't be helped."

"Now look," the Doctor said, and again he turned as if to go. "Let's not be ridiculous. Let's get back to the house and then..."

"Paint-the-cut-with-iodine."

The Doctor hesitated. He saw Klausner's hands tightening on the handle of the axe. He decided that his only alternative was to run away, fast, and he certainly wasn't going to do that.

"All right," he said. "I'll paint it with iodine."

He got his black bag which was lying on the grass about ten yards away, opened it and took out a bottle of iodine and some cotton wool. He went up to the tree trunk, uncorked the bottle, tipped some of the iodine on to the cotton wool, bent down and began to dab it into the cut. He kept one eye on Klausner who was standing motionless with the axe in his hands, watching him.

"Make sure you get it right in."

"Yes," the Doctor said.

"Now do the other one--the one just above it!"

The Doctor did as he was told.

"There you are," he said. "It's done."

He straightened up and surveyed his work in a very serious manner. "That should do nicely."

Klausner came closer and gravely examined the two wounds.

"Yes," he said, nodding his huge head slowly up and down. "Yes, that w

ill do nicely." He stepped back a pace. "You'll come and look at them again tomorrow?"

"Oh, yes," the Doctor said. "Of course." And put some more iodine on?" If necessary, yes.

"Thank you, Doctor," Klausner said, and he nodded his head again and he dropped the axe and all at once he smiled, a wild, excited smile, and quickly the Doctor went over to him and gently he took him by the arm and he said, "Come on, we must go now," and suddenly they were walking away, the two of them, walking silently, rather hurriedly across the park, over the road, back to the house.

Nunc Dimittis

IT is nearly midnight, and I can see that if I don't make a start with writing this story now, I never shall. All evening I have been sitting here trying to force myself to begin, but the more I have thought about it, the more appalled and ashamed and distressed I have become by the whole thing.

My idea--and I believe it was a good one--was to try, by a process of confession and analysis, to discover a reason or at any rate some justification for my outrageous behaviour towards Janet de Pelagia. I wanted, essentially, to address myself to an imaginary and sympathetic listener, a kind of mythical you, someone gentle and understanding to whom I might tell unashamedly every detail of this unfortunate episode. I can only hope that I am not too upset to make a go of it.

If I am to be quite honest with myself, I suppose I shall have to admit that what is disturbing me most is not so much the sense of my own shame, or even the hurt that I have inflicted upon poor Janet; it is the knowledge that I have made a monstrous fool of myself and that all my friends--if I can still call them that--all those warm and lovable people who used to come so often to my house, must now be regarding me as nothing but a vicious, vengeful old man. Yes, that surely hurts. When I say to you that my friends were my whole life--everything, absolutely everything in it--then perhaps you will begin to understand.

Will you? I doubt it unless I digress for a minute to tell you roughly the sort of person I am.

Well--let me see. Now that I come to think of it, I suppose I am, after all, a type; a rare one, mark you, but nevertheless a quite definite type--the wealthy, leisurely, middle-aged man of culture, adored (I choose the word carefully) by his many friends for his charm, his money, his air of scholarship, his generosity, and I sincerely hope for himself also. You will find

find him (this type) only in the big capitals London, Paris, New York; of that I am certain. The money he has was earned by his dead father whose memory he is inclined to despise. This is not his fault, for there is something in his make-up that compels him secretly to look down upon all people who never had the wit to learn the difference between Rockingham and Spode, Waterford and Venetian, Sheraton and Chippendale, Monet and Manet, or even Pommard and Montrachet.

He is, therefore, a connoisseur, possessing above all things an exquisite taste. His Constables, Boningtons, Lautrecs, Redons, Vuillards, Matthew Smiths are as fine as anything in the Tate; and because they are so fabulous and beautiful they create an atmosphere of suspense around him in the home, something tantalizing, breathtaking, faintly frightening--frightening to think that he has the power and the right, if he feels inclined, to slash, tear, plunge his fist through a superb Dedham Vale, a Mont Saint-Victoire, an Arles cornfield, a Tahiti maiden, a portrait of Madame Cezanne. And from the walls on which these wonders hang there issues a little golden glow of splendor, a subtle emanation of grandeur in which he lives and moves and entertains with a sly nonchalance that is not entirely unpractised.

He is invariably a bachelor, yet he never appears to get entangled with the women who surround him, who love him so dearly. It is just possible--and this you may or may not have noticed--that there is a frustration, a discontent, a regret somewhere inside him. Even a slight aberration.

I don't think I need say any more. I have been very frank. You should know me well enough by now to judge me fairly--and dare I hope it?--to sympathize with me when you hear my story. You may even decide that much of the blame for what has happened should be placed, not upon me, but upon a lady called Gladys Ponsonby. After all, she was the one who started it. Had I not escorted Gladys Ponsonby back to her house that night nearly six months ago, and had she not spoken so freely to me about certain people, and certain things, then this tragic business could never have taken place.

It was last December, if I remember rightly, and I had been dining with the Ashendens in that lovely house of theirs that overlooks the southern fringe of Regent's park. There were a fair number of people there, but Gladys Ponsonby was the only one beside myself who had come alone. So when it was time for us to leave, I naturally offered to see her safely back to her house.

She accepted and we left together in my car; but unfortunately, when we arrived at her place she insisted that I come in and have 'one for the road', as she put it. I didn't wish to seem stuffy, so I told the chauffeur to wait and followed her in.

Gladys Ponsonby is an unusually short woman, certainly not more than four feet nine or ten, maybe even less than that--one of those tiny persons who gives me, when I am beside her, the comical, rather wobbly feeling that I a

m standing on a chair. She is a widow, a few years younger than me--maybe fifty-three or four, and it is possible that thirty years ago she was quite a fetching little thing. But now the face is loose and puckered with nothing distinctive about it whatsoever. The individual features, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the chin, are buried in the folds of fat around the puckered little face and one does not notice them. Except perhaps the mouth, which reminds me I cannot help it--of a salmon.

In the living-room, as she gave me my brandy, I noticed that her hand was a trifle unsteady. The lady is tired, I told myself, so I mustn't stay long.

We sat down together on the sofa and for a while discussed the Ashendens' party and the people who were there. Finally I got up to go.

"Sit down, Lionel," she said. "Have another brandy."

"No, really, I must go."

"Sit down and don't be so stuffy. I'm having another one, and the least you can do is keep me company while I drink it."

I watched her as she walked over to the sideboard, this tiny woman, faintly swaying, holding her glass out in front of her with both hands as though it were an offering; and the sight of her walking like that, so incredibly short and squat and stiff, suddenly gave me the ludicrous notion that she had no legs at all above the knees.

"Lionel, what are you chuckling about?" She half turned to look at me as she poured the drink, and some of it slopped over the side of the glass.

"Nothing, my dear. Nothing at all."

"Well, stop it, and tell me what you think of my new portrait." She indicated a large canvas hanging over the fireplace that I had been trying to avoid with my eye ever since I entered the room. It was a hideous thing, painted, as I well knew, by a man who was now all the rage in London, a very mediocre painter called John Royden. It was a full-length portrait of Gladys, Lady Ponsonby, painted with a certain technical cunning that made her out to be a tall and quite alluring creature.

"Charming," I said.

"Isn't it, though! I'm so glad you like it."

"Quite charming."

"I think John Royden is a genius. Don't you think he's a genius, Lionel?"

"Well--that might be going a bit far."

"You mean it's a little early to say for sure?"

"Exactly."

"But listen, Lionel and I think this will surprise you. John Royden is so sought after now that he won't even consider painting anyone for less than a thousand guineas!"

"Really?"

"Oh, yes! And everyone's queueing up, simply queueing up to get themse

lves done."

"Most interesting."

"Now take your Mr Cezanne or whatever his name is. I'll bet he never got that sort of money in his lifetime."

"Never."

"And you say he was a genius?"

"Sort of yes."

"Then so is Royden," she said, settling herself again on the sofa. "The money proves it."

She sat silent for a while, sipping her brandy, and I couldn't help noticing how the unsteadiness of her hand was causing the rim of the glass to jog against her lower lip. She knew I was watching her, and without turning her head she swivelled her eyes and glanced at me cautiously out of the corners of them. "A penny for your thoughts?"

Now, if there is one phrase in the world I cannot abide, it is this. It gives me an actual physical pain in the chest and I begin to cough.

"Come on, Lionel. A penny for them."

I shook my head, quite unable to answer. She turned away abruptly and placed the brandy glass on a small table to her left; and the manner in which she did this seemed to suggest--I don't know why--that she felt rebuffed and was now clearing the decks for action. I waited, rather uncomfortable in the silence that followed, and because I had no conversation left in me, I made a great play about smoking my cigar, studying the ash intently and blowing the smoke up slowly towards the ceiling. But she made no move. There was beginning to be something about this lady I did not much like, a mischievous brooding air that made me want to get up quickly and go away. When she looked around again, she was smiling at me slyly with those little buried eyes of hers, but the mouth--oh, just like a salmon's--was absolutely rigid.

"Lionel, I think I'll tell you a secret."

"Really, Gladys, I simply must get home."

"Don't be frightened, Lionel. I won't embarrass you. You look so frightened all of a sudden."

"I'm not very good at secrets."

"I've been thinking," she said, "you're such a great expert on pictures, this ought to interest you." She sat quite still except for her fingers which were moving all the time. She kept them perpetually twisting and twisting around each other, and they were like a bunch of small white snakes wriggling in her lap.

"Don't you want to hear my secret, Lionel?"

"It isn't that, you know. It's just that it's so awfully late..."

"This is probably the best-kept secret in London. A woman's secret. I suppose it's known to about let me see--about thirty or forty women altogether

er. And not a single man. Except him, of course--John Royden."

I didn't wish to encourage her, so I said nothing.

"But first of all, promise--promise you won't tell a soul?"

"Dear me!"

"You promise, Lionel?"

"Yes, Gladys, all right, I promise."

"Good! Now listen." She reached for the brandy glass and settled back comfortably in the far corner of the sofa. "I suppose you know John Royden paints only women?"

"I didn't."

"And they're always full-length portraits, either standing or sitting--like mine there. Now take a good look at it, Lionel. Do you see how beautifully the dress is painted?"

"Well... "Go over and look carefully, please."

I got up reluctantly and went over and examined the painting. To my surprise I noticed that the paint of the dress was laid on so heavily it was actually raised out from the rest of the picture. It was a trick, quite effective in its way, but neither difficult to do nor entirely original.

"You see?" she said. "It's thick, isn't it, where the dress is?"

"Yes."

"But there's a bit more to it than that, you know, Lionel. I think the best way is to describe what happened the very first time I went along for a sitting." Oh, what a bore this woman is, I thought, and how can I get away?

"That was about a year ago, and I remember how excited I was to be going into the studio of the great painter. I dressed myself up in a wonderful new thing I'd just got from Norman Hartnell, and a special little red hat, and off I went. Mr Royden met me at the door, and of course I was fascinated by him at once. He had a small pointed beard and thrilling blue eyes, and he wore a black velvet jacket. The studio was huge, with red velvet sofas and velvet chairs--he loves velvet--and velvet curtains and even a velvet carpet on the floor. He sat me down, gave me a drink and came straight to the point. He told me about how he painted quite differently from other artists. In his opinion, he said, there was only one method of attaining perfection when painting a woman's body and I mustn't be shocked when I heard what it was.

"I don't think I'll be shocked, Mr Royden," I told him.

"I'm sure you won't either," he said. He had the most marvellous white teeth and they sort of shone through his beard when he smiled. "You see, it's like this," he went on. "You examine any painting you like of a woman--I don't care who it's by--and you'll see that although the dress may be well painted, there is an effect of artificiality, of flatness about the whole thing, as though the dress were draped over a log of wood. And you know why?"

"No, Mr Royden, I don't."

"Because the painters themselves didn't really know what was underneath!"

Gladys Ponsonby paused to take a few more sips of brandy. "Don't look so startled, Lionel," she said to me. "There's nothing wrong about this. Keep quiet and let me finish. So then Mr Royden said, 'That's why I insist on painting my subjects first of all in the nude.'

"Good Heavens, Mr Royden!" I exclaimed.

"If you object to that, I don't mind making a slight concession, Lady Ponsonby," he said. "But I prefer it the other way."

"Really, Mr Royden, I don't know."

"And when I've done you like that," he went on, "we'll have to wait a few weeks for the paint to dry. Then you come back and I paint on your underclothing. And when that's dry, I paint on the dress. You see, it's quite simple."

"The man's an absolute bounder!" I cried.

"No, Lionel, no! You're quite wrong. If only you could have heard him, so charming about it all, so genuine and sincere. Anyone could see he really felt what he was saying."

"I tell you, Gladys, the man's a bounder!"

"Don't be so silly, Lionel. And anyway, let me finish. The first thing I told him was that my husband (who was alive then) would never agree."

"Your husband need never know," he answered. "Why trouble him. No one knows my secret except the women I've painted."

"And when I protested a bit more, I remember he said, 'My dear Lady Ponsonby, there's nothing immoral about this. Art is only immoral when practised by amateurs. It's the same with medicine. You wouldn't refuse to undress before your doctor, would you?'"

"I told him I would if I'd gone to him for ear-ache. That made him laugh. But he kept on at me about it and I must say he was very convincing, so after a while I gave in and that was that. So now, Lionel, my sweet, you know the secret." She got up and went over to fetch herself some more brandy.

"Gladys, is this really true?"

"Of course it's true."

"You mean to say that's the way he paints all his subjects?"

"Yes. And the joke is the husbands never know anything about it. All they see is a nice fully clothed portrait of their wives. Of course, there's nothing wrong with being painted in the nude; artists do it all the time. But our silly husbands have a way of objecting to that sort of thing."

"By gad, the fellow's got a nerve!"

"I think he's a genius."

"I'll bet he got the idea from Goya."

"Nonsense, Lionel."

"Of course he did. But listen, Gladys, I want you to tell me something."

Did you by any chance know about this... this peculiar technique of Royden's before you went to him?"

When I asked the question she was in the act of pouring the brandy, and she hesitated and turned her head to look at me, a little silky smile moving the corners of her mouth. "Damn you, Lionel," she said. "You're far too clever. You never let me get away with a single thing."

"So you knew?"

"Of course. Hermione Girdlestone told me."

"Exactly as I thought!"

"There's still nothing wrong."

"Nothing." I said. "Absolutely nothing." I could see it all quite clearly now. This Royden was indeed a bounder, practising as neat a piece of psychological trickery as ever I'd seen. The man knew only too well that there was a whole set of wealthy indolent women in the city who got up at noon and spent the rest of the day trying to relieve their boredom with bridge and canasta and shopping until the cocktail hour came along. All they craved was a little excitement, something out of the ordinary, and the more expensive the better. Why the news of an entertainment like this would spread through their ranks like smallpox. I could just see the great plump Hermione Girdlestone leaning over the canasta table and telling them about it 'But my dear, it's simply fascinating... I can't tell you how intriguing it is... much more fun than going to your doctor...' "You won't tell anyone, Lionel, will you? You promised."

"No, of course not. But now I must go, Gladys, I really must."

"Don't be so silly. I'm just beginning to enjoy myself. Stay till I've finished this drink, anyway."

I sat patiently on the sofa while she went on with her interminable brandy sipping. The little buried eyes were still watching me out of their corners in that mischievous, canny way, and I had a strong feeling that the woman was now hatching out some further unpleasantness or scandal. There was the look of serpents in those eyes and a queer curl around the mouth; and in the air--although maybe I only imagined it--the faint smell of danger.

Then suddenly, so suddenly that I jumped, she said, "Lionel, what's this I hear about you and Janet de Pelagia?"

"Now. Gladys, please.."

"Lionel, you're blushing!"

"Nonsense."

"Don't tell me the old bachelor has really taken a tumble at last?"

"Gladys, this is too absurd." I began making movements to go, but she put a hand on my knee and stopped me.

"Don't you know by now, Lionel, that there are no secrets?"

"Janet is a fine girl."

"You can hardly call her a girl." Gladys Ponsonby paused, staring down into the large brandy glass that she held cupped in both hands. "But of course, I agree with you, Lionel, she's a wonderful person in every way. Except," and now she spoke very slowly, "except that she does say some rather peculiar things occasionally."

"What sort of things?"

"Just things, you know--things about people. About you."

"What did she say about me?"

"Nothing at all, Lionel. It wouldn't interest you."

"What did she say about me?"

"It's not even worth repeating, honestly it isn't. It's only that it struck me as being rather odd at the time."

"Gladys--what did she say?" While I waited for her to answer, I could feel the sweat breaking out all over my body.

"Well now, let me see. Of course, she was only joking or I couldn't dream of telling you, but I suppose she did say how it was all a wee bit of a bore."

"What was?"

"Sort of going out to dinner with you nearly every night that kind of thing ."

"She said it was a bore?"

"Yes." Gladys Ponsonby drained the brandy glass with one last big gulp, and sat up straight. "If you really want to know, she said it was a crashing bore. And then.."

"What did she say then?"

"Now look, Lionel--there's no need to get excited. I'm only telling you this for your own good."

"Then please hurry up and tell it."

"It's just that I happened to be playing canasta with Janet this afternoon and I asked her if she was free to dine with me tomorrow. She said no, she wasn't."

"Go on."

"Well--actually what she said was 'I'm dining with that crashing old bore Lionel Lampson.'"

"Janet said that?"

"Yes, Lionel dear."

"What else?"

"Now, that's enough. I don't think I should tell the rest."

"Finish it, please!"

"Why, Lionel, don't keep shouting at me like that. Of course I'll tell you if you insist. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't consider myself a true friend if I didn't. Don't you think it's the sign of true friendship when two people like u

s... "

"Gladys! Please hurry."

"Good heavens, you must give me time to think. Let me see now--so far as I can remember, what she actually said was this..

-and Gladys Ponsonby, sitting upright on the sofa with her feet not quite touching the floor, her eyes away from me now, looking at the wall, began cleverly to mimic the deep tone of that voice I knew so well--"Such a bore, my dear, because with Lionel one can always tell exactly what will happen right from beginning to end. For dinner we'll go to the Savoy Grill--it's always the Savoy Grill--and for two hours I'll have to listen to the pompous old ... I mean I'll have to listen to him droning away about pictures and porcelain--always pictures and porcelain. Then in the taxi going home he'll reach out for my hand, and he'll lean closer, and I'll get a whiff of stale cigar smoke and brandy, and he'll start burbling about how he wished--oh, how he wished he was just twenty years younger. And I will say, 'Could you open a window, do you mind?' And when we arrive at my house I'll tell him to keep the taxi, but he'll pretend he hasn't heard and pay it off quickly. And then at the front door, while I fish for my key, he'll stand beside me with a sort of silly spaniel look in his eyes, and I'll slowly put the key in the lock, and slowly turn it, and then--very quickly, before he has time to move--I'll say good night and skip inside and shut the door behind me... ' Why, Lionel ! What's the matter, dear? You look positively ill.

At that point, mercifully, I must have swooned clear away. I can remember practically nothing of the rest of that terrible night except for a vague and disturbing suspicion that when I regained consciousness I broke down completely and permitted Gladys Ponsonby to comfort me in a variety of different ways. Later, I believe I walked out of the house and was driven home, but I remained more or less unconscious of everything around me until I woke up in my bed the next morning.

I awoke feeling weak and shaken. I lay still with my eyes closed, trying to piece together the events of the night before Gladys Ponsonby's living-room, Gladys on the sofa sipping brandy, the little puckered face, the mouth that was like a salmon's mouth, the things she had said What was it she had said? Ah, yes. About me. My God, yes! About Janet and me! Those outrageous, unbelievable remarks! Could Janet really have made them? Could she?

I can remember with what terrifying swiftness my hatred of Janet de Pelagia now began to grow. It all happened in a few minutes--a sudden, violent welling up of a hatred that filled me till I thought I was going to burst. I tried to dismiss it, but it was on me like a fever, and in no time at all I was hunting around, as would some filthy gangster, for a method of revenge.

A curious way to behave, you may say, for a man such as me; to which I would answer no, not really, if you consider the circumstances. To my mind,

this was the sort of thing that could drive a man to murder. As a matter of fact, had it not been for a small sadistic streak that caused me to seek a more subtle and painful punishment for my victim, I might well have become a murderer myself. But mere killing, I decided, was too good for this woman, and far too crude for my own taste. So I began looking for a superior alternative.

I am not normally a scheming person; I consider it an odious business and have had no practice in it whatsoever. But fury and hate can concentrate a man's mind to an astonishing degree, and in no time at all a plot was forming and unfolding in my head--a plot so superior and exciting that I began to be quite carried away at the idea of it. By the time I had filled in the details and overcome one or two minor objections, my brooding vengeful mood had changed to one of extreme elation, and I remember how I started bouncing up and down absurdly on my bed and clapping my hands. The next thing I knew I had the telephone directory on my lap and was searching eagerly for a name. I found it, picked up the phone, and dialled the number.

"Hello," I said. "Mr Royden? Mr John Royden?"

"Speaking." Well--it wasn't difficult to persuade the man to call around and see me for a moment. I had never met him, but of course he knew my name, both as an important collector of paintings and as a person of some consequence in society. I was a big fish for him to catch.

"Let me see now, Mr Lampson," he said, "I think I ought to be free in about a couple of hours. Will that be all right?"

I told him it would be fine, gave my address, and rang off.

I jumped out of bed. It was really remarkable how exhilarated I felt all of a sudden. One moment I had been in an agony of despair, contemplating murder and suicide and I don't know what, the next, I was whistling an aria from Puccini in my bath. Every now and again I caught myself rubbing my hands together in a devilish fashion, and once, during my exercises, when I overbalanced doing a double-knee-bend, I sat on the floor and giggled like a schoolboy.

At the appointed time Mr John Royden was shown in to my library and I got up to meet him. He was a small neat man with a slightly ginger goatee beard. He wore a black velvet jacket, a rust-brown tie, a red pullover, and black suede shoes. I shook his small neat hand.

"Good of you to come along so quickly, Mr Royden."

"Not at all, sir." The man's lips--like the lips of nearly all bearded men--looked wet and naked, a trifle indecent, shining pink in among all that hair. After telling him again how much I admired his work, I got straight down to business.

"Mr Royden," I said. "I have a rather unusual request to make of you, something quite personal in its way."

"Yes, Mr Lampson?" He was sitting in the chair opposite me and he cocked his head over to one side, quick and perky like a bird.

"Of course, I know I can trust you to be discreet about anything I say."

"Absolutely, Mr Lampson."

"All right. Now my proposition is this: there is a certain lady in town here whose portrait I would like you to paint. I very much want to possess a fine painting of her. But there are certain complications. For example, I have my own reasons for not wishing her to know that it is I who am commissioning the portrait."

"You mean.."

"Exactly, Mr Royden. That is exactly what I mean. As a man of the world I'm sure you will understand."

He smiled, a crooked little smile that only just came through his beard, and he nodded his head knowingly up and down.

"Is it not possible," I said, "that a man might be--how shall I put it?--extremely fond of a lady and at the same time have his own good reasons for not wishing her to know about it yet?"

"More than possible, Mr Lampson." with a man has to stalk his quarry with great caution, waiting patiently for the right moment to reveal himself."

"Precisely, Mr Lampson."

"There are better ways of catching a bird than by chasing it through the woods."

"Yes, indeed, Mr Lampson."

"Putting salt on its tail, for instance."

"Ha-ha?"

"All right, Mr Royden, I think you understand. Now--do you happen by any chance to know a lady called Janet de Pelagia?"

"Janet de Pelagia? Let me see now--yes. At least, what I mean is I've heard of her. I couldn't exactly say I know her."

"That's a pity. It makes it a little more difficult. Do you think you could get to meet her--perhaps at a cocktail party or something like that?"

"Shouldn't be too tricky, Mr Lampson."

"Good, because what I suggest is this: that you go up to her and tell her she's the sort of model you've been searching for for years--just the right face, the right figure, the right coloured eyes. You know the sort of thing. Then ask her if she'd mind sitting for you free of charge. Say you'd like to do a picture of her for next year's Academy. I feel sure she'd be delighted to help you, and honoured too, if I may say so. Then you will paint her and exhibit the picture and deliver it to me after the show is over. No one but you need know that I have bought it."

The small round eyes of Mr Royden were watching me shrewdly, I thought, and the head was again cocked over to one side. He was sitting on the edge of

f his chair, and in this position, with the pullover making a flash of red down his front, he reminded me of a robin on a twig listening for a suspicious noise.

"There's really nothing wrong about it at all," I said. "Just call it--if you like--a harmless little conspiracy being perpetrated by a... well by a rather romantic old man."

"I know, Mr Lampson, I know..." He still seemed to be hesitating, so I said quickly, "I'll be glad to pay you double your usual fee."

That did it. The man actually licked his lips. "Well, Mr Lampson, I must say this sort of thing's not really in my line, you know. But all the same, it'd be a very heartless man who refused such a--shall I say such a romantic assignment?"

"I should like a full-length portrait, Mr Royden, please. A large canvas--let me see about twice the size of that Manet on the wall there."

"About sixty by thirty-six?"

"Yes. And I should like her to be standing. That to my mind, is her most graceful attitude."

"I quite understand, Mr Lampson. And it'll be a pleasure to paint such a lovely lady."

I expect it will, I told myself. The way you go about it, my boy, I'm quite sure it will, But I said, "All right, Mr Royden, then I'll leave it all to you. And don't forget, please--this is a little secret between ourselves."

When he had gone I forced myself to sit still and take twenty-five deep breaths. Nothing else would have restrained me from jumping up and shouting for joy like an idiot. I have never in my life felt so exhilarated. My plan was working! The most difficult part was already accomplished. There would be a wait now, a long wait. The way this man painted, it would take him several months to finish the picture. Well, I would just have to be patient, that's all.

I now decided, on the spur of the moment, that it would be best if I were to go abroad in the interim; and the very next morning, after sending a message to Janet (with whom, you will remember, I was due to dine that night) telling her I had been called away, I left for Italy.

There, as always, I had a delightful time, marred only by a constant nervous excitement caused by the thought of returning to the scene of action.

I eventually arrived back, four months later, in July, on the day after the opening of the Royal Academy, and I found to my relief that everything had gone according to plan during my absence. The picture of Janet de Pelagia had been painted and hung in the Exhibition, and it was already the subject of much favourable comment both by the critics and the public. I myself refrained from going to see it, but Royden told me on the telephone that there had been several inquiries by persons who wished to buy it, all of wh

om had been informed that it was not for sale. When the show was over, Royden delivered the picture to my house and received his money.

I immediately had it carried up to my workroom, and with mounting excitement I began to examine it closely. The man had painted her standing up in a black evening dress and there was a red-plush sofa in the background. Her left hand was resting on the back of a heavy chair, also of red-plush, and there was a huge crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

My God, I thought, what a hideous thing! The portrait itself wasn't so bad. He had caught the woman's expression--the forward drop of the head, the wide blue eyes, the large, ugly-beautiful mouth with the trace of a smile in one corner. He had flattered her, of course. There wasn't a wrinkle on her face or the slightest suggestion of fat under her chin. I bent forward to examine the painting of the dress. Yes here the paint was thicker, much thicker. At this point, unable to wait another moment, I threw off my coat and prepared to go to work.

I should mention here that I am myself an expert cleaner and restorer of paintings. The cleaning, particularly, is a comparatively simple process provided one has patience and a gentle touch, and those professionals who make such a secret of their trade and charge such shocking prices get no business from me. Where my own pictures are concerned I always do the job myself.

I poured out the turpentine and added a few drops of alcohol. I dipped a small wad of cotton wool in the mixture, squeezed it out, and then gently, so very gently, with a circular motion, I began to work upon the black paint of the dress. I could only hope that Royden had allowed each layer to dry thoroughly before applying the next, otherwise the two would merge and the process I had in mind would be impossible. Soon I would know. I was working on one square inch of black dress somewhere around the lady's stomach and I took plenty of time, cautiously testing and teasing the paint, adding a drop or two more of alcohol to my mixture, testing again, adding another drop until finally it was just strong enough to loosen the pigment.

For perhaps a whole hour I worked away on this little square of black, proceeding more and more gently as I came closer to the layer below. Then, a tiny pink spot appeared, and gradually it spread and spread until the whole of my square inch was a clear shining patch of pink. Quickly I neutralized with pure turps.

So far so good. I knew now that the black paint could be removed without disturbing what was underneath. So long as I was patient and industrious I would easily be able to take it all off. Also, I had discovered the right mixture to use and just how hard I could safely rub, so things should go much quicker now.

I must say it was rather an amusing business. I worked first from the mi

ddle of her body downward, and as the lower half of her dress came away bit by bit on to my little wads of cotton, a queer pink undergarment began to reveal itself. I didn't for the life of me know what the thing was called, but it was a formidable apparatus constructed of what appeared to be a strong thick elastic material, and its purpose was apparently to contain and to compress the woman's bulging figure into a neat streamlined shape, giving a quite false impression of slimness. As I travelled lower and lower down, I came upon a striking arrangement of suspenders, also pink, which were attached to this elastic armour and hung downwards four or five inches to grip the tops of the stockings.

Quite fantastic the whole thing seemed to me as I stepped back a pace to survey it. It gave me a strong sense of having somehow been cheated; for had I not, during all these past months, been admiring the sylph-like figure of this lady? She was a faker. No question about it. But do many other females practise this sort of deception, I wondered. I knew, of course, that in the days of stays and corsets it was usual for ladies to strap themselves up; yet for some reason I was under the impression that nowadays all they had to do was diet.

When the whole of the lower half of the dress had come away, I immediately turned my attention to the upper portion, working my way slowly upward from the lady's middle. Here, around the midriff, there was an area of naked flesh; then higher up upon the bosom itself and actually containing it, I came upon a contrivance made of some heavy black material edged with frilly lace. This, I knew very well, was the brassiere--another formidable appliance upheld by an arrangement of black straps as skilfully and scientifically rigged as the supporting cables of a suspension bridge.

Dear me, I thought. One lives and learns.

But now at last the job was finished, and I stepped back again to take a final look at the picture. It was truly an astonishing sight! This woman, Janet de Pelagia, almost life size, standing there in her underwear--in a sort of drawing-room, I suppose it was--with a great chandelier above her head and a red-plush chair by her side; and she herself--this was the most disturbing part of all--looking so completely unconcerned, with the wide placid blue eyes, the faintly smiling, ugly-beautiful mouth. Also I noticed, with something of a shock, that she was exceedingly bow-legged, like a jockey. I tell you frankly, the whole thing embarrassed me. I felt as though I had no right to be in the room, certainly no right to stare. So after a while I went out and shut the door behind me. It seemed like the only decent thing to do.

Now, for the next and final step! And do not imagine simply because I have not mentioned it lately that my thirst for revenge had in any way diminished during the last few months. On the contrary, it had if anything increased; and with the last act about to be performed, I can tell you I found it hard t

o contain myself. That night, for example, I didn't even go to bed.

You see, I couldn't wait to get the invitations out. I sat up all night preparing them and addressing the envelopes. There were twentytwo of them in all, and I wanted each to be a personal note. 'I'm having a little dinner on Friday night, the twenty-second, at eight. I do hope you can come along... I'm so looking forward to seeing you again The first, the most carefully phrased, was to Janet de Pelagia. In it I regretted not having seen her for so long... I had been abroad... It was time we got together again, etc., etc. The next was to Gladys Ponsonby. Then one to Lady Hermione Girdlestone, another to Princess Bicheno, Mrs Cudbird, Sir Hubert Kaul, Mrs Galbally, Peter EuanThomas, James Pisker, Sir Eustace Piegrome, Peter van Santen, Elizabeth Moynihan, Lord Mulherrin, Bertram Sturt, Philip Cornelius, Jack Hill, Lady Akeman, Mrs Icely, Humphrey KingHoward, Johnny O' Coffey, Mrs Uvary, and the Dowager Countess of Waxworth.

It was a carefully selected list, containing as it did the most distinguished men, the most brilliant and influential women in the top crust of our society.

I was well aware that dinner at my house was regarded as quite an occasion; everybody liked to come. And now, as I watched the point of my pen moving swiftly over the paper, I could almost see the ladies in their pleasure picking up their bedside telephones the morning the invitations arrived, shrill voices calling to shriller voices over the wires... 'Lionel's giving a party...

he's asked you too? My dear, how nice... his food is always so good... and such a lovely man, isn't he though, yes..

Is that really what they would say? It suddenly occurred to me that it might not be like that at all. More like this perhaps: 'I agree, my dear, yes, not a bad old man... but a bit of a bore, don't you think?... What did you say?

¥ dull? But desperately, my dear. You've hit the nail on the head... did you ever hear what Janet de Pelagia once said about him?... Ah yes, I thought you'd heard that one... screamingly funny, don't you think?... poor Janet... how she stood it as long as she did I don't know.

Anyway, I got the invitations off, and within a couple of days everybody with the exception of Mrs Cudbird and Sir Hubert Kaul, who were away, had accepted with pleasure.

At eight-thirty on the evening of the twentysecond, my large drawing-room was filled with people. They stood about the room, admiring the pictures, drinking their Martinis, talking with loud voices. The women smelled strongly of scent, the men were pink-faced and carefully buttoned up in their dinner-jackets. Janet de Pelagia was wearing the same black dress she had used for the portrait, and every time I caught sight of her, a kind of huge bubble--as in those absurd cartoons--would float up above my head, and in it I would see Janet in her underclothes, the black brassiere, the pink elasti

c belt, the suspenders, the jockey's legs.

I moved from group to group, chatting amiably with them all, listening to their talk. Behind me I could hear Mrs Galbally telling Sir Eustace Piegrome and James Pisker how the man at the next table to hers at Claridges the night before had had red lipstick on his white moustache. "Simply plastered with it," she kept on saying, "and the old boy was ninety if he was a day..." On the other side, Lady Girdlestone was telling somebody where one could get truffles cooked in brandy, and I could see Mrs Icely whispering something to Lord Mulherrin while his Lordship kept shaking his head slowly from side to side like an old and dispirited metronome.

Dinner was announced, and we all moved out.

"My goodness!" they cried as they entered the dining-room. "How dark and sinister!"

"I can hardly see a thing!"

"What divine little candles!"

"But Lionel, how romantic!"

There were six very thin candles set about two feet apart from each other down the centre of the long table. Their small flames made a little glow of light around the table itself, but left the rest of the room in darkness. It was an amusing arrangement and apart from the fact that it suited my purpose well, it made a pleasant change. The guests soon settled themselves in their right places and the meal began.

They all seemed to enjoy the candlelight and things went famously, though for some reason the darkness caused them to speak much louder than usual. Janet de Pelagia's voice struck me as being particularly strident. She was sitting next to Lord Muiherrin, and I could hear her telling him about the boring time she had had at Cap Ferrat the week before. "Nothing but French men," she kept saying. "Nothing but Frenchmen in the whole place..."

For my part, I was watching the candles. They were so thin that I knew it would not be long before they burned down to their bases. Also I was mighty nervous--I will admit that--but at the same time intensely exhilarated, almost to the point of drunkenness. Every time I heard Janet's voice or caught sight of her face shadowed in the light of the candles, a little ball of excitement exploded inside me and I felt the fire of it running under my skin.

They were eating their strawberries when at last I decided the time had come. I took a deep breath and in a loud voice I said, "I'm afraid we'll have to have the lights on now. The candles are nearly finished. Mary," I called. "Oh, Mary, switch on the lights, will you please,"

There was a moment of silence after my announcement. I heard the maid walking over to the door, then the gentle click of the switch and the room was flooded with a blaze of light. They all screwed up their eyes, opened them again, gazed about them.

At that point I got up from my chair and slid quietly from the room, but as I went I saw a sight that I shall never forget as long as I live. It was Janet, with both hands in mid-air, stopped, frozen rigid, caught in the act of gesticulating towards someone across the table. Her mouth had dropped open two inches and she wore the surprised, not-quite-understanding look of a person who precisely one second before has been shot dead, right through the heart.

In the hall outside I paused and listened to the beginning of the uproar, the shrill cries of the ladies and the outraged unbelieving exclamations of the men; and soon there was a great hum of noise with everybody talking or shouting at the same time. Then--and this was the sweetest moment of all--I heard Lord Mulherrin's voice, roaring above the rest, "Here! Someone! Hurry! Give her some water quick!"

Out in the street the chauffeur helped me into my car, and soon we were away from London and bowling merrily along the Great North Road towards this, my other house, which is only ninety-five miles from Town anyway.

The next two days I spent in gloating. I mooned around in a dream of ecstasy, half drowned in my own complacency and filled with a sense of pleasure so great that it constantly gave me pins and needles all along the lower parts of my legs. It wasn't until this morning when Gladys Ponsonby called me on the phone that I suddenly came to my senses and realized I was not a hero at all but an outcast. She informed me--with what I thought was just a trace of relish that everybody was up in arms, that all of them, all my old and loving friends were saying the most terrible things about me and had sworn never never to speak to me again. Except her, she kept saying. Everybody except her. And didn't I think it would be rather cosy, she asked, if she were to come down and stay with me a few days to cheer me up?

I'm afraid I was too upset by that time even to answer her politely. I put the phone down and went away to weep.

Then at noon today came the final crushing blow. The post arrived, and with it--I can hardly bring myself to write about it, I am so ashamed--came a letter, the sweetest, most tender little note imaginable from none other than Janet de Pelagia herself. She forgave me completely, she wrote, for everything I had done. She knew it was only a joke and I must not listen to the horrid things other people were saying about me. She loved me as she always had and always would to her dying day.

Oh, what a cad, what a brute I felt when I read this! The more so when I found that she had actually sent me by the same post a small present as an added sign of her affection--a half-pound jar of my favourite food of all, fresh caviare.

I can never under any circumstances resist good caviare. It is perhaps my greatest weakness. So although I naturally had no appetite whatsoever for fo

od at dinner-time this evening, I must confess I took a few spoonfuls of the stuff in an effort to console myself in my misery. It is even possible that I took a shade too much, because I haven't been feeling any too chipper this last hour or so. Perhaps I ought to go up right away and get myself some bicarbonate of soda. I can easily come back and finish this later, when I'm in better trim.

You know--now I come to think of it, I really do feel rather ill all of a sudden.

The Great Automatic Grammatizator

WELL, Knipe, my boy. Now that it's finished. I just called you in to tell you I think you've done a fine job."

Adolph Knipe stood still in front of Mr Bohien's desk. There seemed to be no enthusiasm in him at all.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"Oh yes, Mr Bohien."

"Did you see what the papers said this morning?"

"No sir, I didn't."

The man behind the desk pulled a folded newspaper towards him, and began to read: "The building of the great automatic computing engine, ordered by the government some time ago, is now complete. It is probably the fastest electronic calculating machine in the world today. Its function is to satisfy the ever-increasing need of science, industry, and administration for rapid mathematical calculation which, in the past, by traditional methods, would have been physically impossible, or would have required more time than the problems justified. The speed with which the new engine works, said Mr John Bohien, head of the firm of electrical engineers mainly responsible for its construction, may be grasped by the fact that it can provide the correct answer in five seconds to a problem that would occupy a mathematician for a month. In three minutes, it can produce a calculation that by hand (if it were possible) would fill half a million sheets of foolscap paper. The automatic computing engine uses pulses of electricity, generated at the rate of a million a second, to solve all calculations that resolve themselves into addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. For practical purposes there is no limit to what it can do... Mr Bohien glanced up at the long, melancholy face of the younger man. "Aren't you proud, Knipe? Aren't you pleased."

"Of course, Mr Bohien."

"I don't think I have to remind you that your own contribution, especially to the original plans, was an important one. In fact, I might go so far as to

say that without you and some of your ideas, this project might still be on the drawing-boards today."

Adolph Knipe moved his feet on the carpet, and he watched the two small white hands of his chief, the nervous fingers playing with a paperclip, unbending it, straightening out the hairpin curves. He didn't like the man's hands. He didn't like his face either, with the tiny mouth and the narrow purple-coloured lips. It was unpleasant the way only the lower lip moved when he talked.

"Is anything bothering you, Knipe? Anything on your mind?"

"Oh no, Mr Bohlen. No."

"How would you like to take a week's holiday? Do you good. You've earned it."

"Oh, I don't know, sir."

The older man waited, watching this tall, thin person who stood so sloppily before him. He was a difficult boy. Why couldn't he stand up straight? Always drooping and untidy, with spots on his jacket, and hair falling all over his face.

"I'd like you to take a holiday, Knipe. You need it."

"All right, sir. If you wish."

"Take a week. Two weeks if you like. Go somewhere warm. Get some sunshine. Swim. Relax. Sleep. Then come back, and we'll have another talk about the future."

Adolph Knipe went home by bus to his two-room apartment. He threw his coat on the sofa, poured himself a drink of whisky, and sat down in front of the typewriter that was on the table. Mr Bohlen was right. Of course he was right. Except that he didn't know the half of it. He probably thought it was a woman. Whenever a young man gets depressed, everybody thinks it's a woman.

He leaned forward and began to read through the half-finished sheet of typing still in the machine. It was headed 'A Narrow Escape', and it began 'The night was dark and stormy, the wind whistled in the trees, the rain poured down like cats and dogs...

Adolph Knipe took a sip of whisky, tasting the malty-bitter flavour, feeling the trickle of cold liquid as it travelled down his throat and settled in the top of his stomach, cool at first, then spreading and becoming warm, making a little area of warmth in the gut. To hell with Mr John Bohlen any way. And to hell with the great electrical computing machine. To hell with A t exactly that moment, his eyes and mouth began slowly to open, in a sort of wonder, and slowly he raised his head and became still, absolutely motionless, gazing at the wall opposite with this look that was more perhaps of astonishment than of wonder, but quite fixed now, unmoving, and remaining thus for forty, fifty, sixty seconds. Then gradually (the head still motionless),

a subtle change spreading over the face, astonishment becoming pleasure, very slight at first, only around the corners of the mouth, increasing gradually, spreading out until at last the whole face was open wide and shining with extreme delight. It was the first time Adolph Knipe had smiled in many, many months.

"Of course," he said, speaking aloud, "it's completely ridiculous." Again he smiled, raising his upper lip and baring his teeth in a queerly sensual manner.

"It's a delicious idea, but so impracticable it doesn't really bear thinking about at all."

From then on, Adolph Knipe began to think about nothing else. The idea fascinated him enormously, at first because it gave him a promise--however remote--of revenging himself in a most devilish manner upon his greatest enemies. From this angle alone, he toyed idly with it for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes; then all at once he found himself examining it quite seriously as a practical possibility. He took paper and made some preliminary notes.

But he didn't get far. He found himself, almost immediately, up against the old truth that a machine, however ingenious, is incapable of original thought. It can handle no problems except those that resolve themselves into mathematical terms--problems that contain one, and only one, correct answer.

This was a stumper. There didn't seem any way around it. A machine cannot have a brain. On the other hand, it can have a memory, can it not? Their own electronic calculator had a marvellous memory. Simply by converting electric pulses, through a column of mercury, into supersonic waves, it could store away at least a thousand numbers at a time, extracting any one of them at the precise moment it was needed. Would it not be possible, therefore, on this principle, to build a memory section of almost unlimited size?

Now what about that?

Then suddenly, he was struck by a powerful but simple little truth, and it was this: that English grammar is governed by rules that are almost mathematical in their strictness! Given the words, and given the sense of what is to be said, then there is only one correct order in which those words can be arranged.

No, he thought, that isn't quite accurate. In many sentences there are several alternative positions for words and phrases, all of which may be grammatically correct. But what the hell. The theory itself is basically true. Therefore, it stands to reason that an engine built along the lines of the electric computer could be adjusted to arrange words (instead of numbers) in their right order according to the rules of grammar. Give it the verbs, the nouns, the adjectives, the pronouns, store them in the memory section as a vocabulary, and arrange for them to be extracted as required. Then feed it with plots and leave it to write the sentences.

There was no stopping Knipe now. He went to work immediately, and there followed during the next few days a period of intense labour. The living-room became littered with sheets of paper: formulae and calculations; lists of words, thousands and thousands of words; the plots of stories, curiously broken up and subdivided; huge extracts from Roget's Thesaurus; pages filled with the first names of men and women; hundreds of surnames taken from the telephone directory; intricate drawings of wires and circuits and switches and thermionic valves; drawings of machines that could punch holes of different shapes in little cards, and of a strange electric typewriter that could type ten thousand words a minute. Also a kind of control panel with a series of small push-buttons, each one labelled with the name of a famous American magazine.

He was working in a mood of exultation, prowling around the room amidst this littering of paper, rubbing his hands together, talking out loud to himself; and sometimes, with a sly curl of the nose he would mutter a series of murderous imprecations in which the word 'editor' seemed always to be present. On the fifteenth day of continuous work, he collected the papers into two large folders which he carried--almost at a run--to the offices of John Bohien Inc., electrical engineers.

Mr Bohien was pleased to see him back.

"Well Knipe, good gracious me, you look a hundred per cent better. You have a good holiday? Where'd you go?"

He's just as ugly and untidy as ever, Mr Bohien thought. Why doesn't he stand up straight? He looks like a bent stick. "You look a hundred per cent better, my boy." I wonder what he's grinning about. Every time I see him, his ears seem to have got larger.

Adolph Knipe placed the folders on the desk. "Look, Mr Bohien!" he cried. "Look at these!"

Then he poured out his story. He opened the folders and pushed the plans in front of the astonished little man. He talked for over an hour, explaining everything, and when he had finished, he stepped back, breathless, flushed, waiting for the verdict.

"You know what I think, Knipe? I think you're nuts." Careful now, Mr Bohien told himself. Treat him carefully. He's valuable, this one is. If only he didn't look so awful, with that long horse face and the big teeth. The fellow had ears as big as rhubarb leaves.

"But Mr Bohien! It'll work! I've proved to you it'll work! You can't deny that!"

"Take it easy now, Knipe. Take it easy, and listen to me."

Adolph Knipe watched his man, disliking him more every second.

"This idea," Mr Bohien's lower lip was saying, "is very ingenious--I might almost say brilliant--and it only goes to confirm my opinion of your ability."

ies, Knipe. But don't take it too seriously. After all, my boy, what possible use can it be to us? Who on earth wants a machine for writing stories? And where's the money in it, anyway? Just tell me that."

"May I sit down, sir?"

"Sure, take a seat."

Adolph Knipe seated himself on the edge of a chair. The older man watched him with alert brown eyes, wondering what was coming now.

"I would like to explain something Mr Bohien, if I may, about how I came to do all this."

"Go right ahead, Knipe." He would have to be humoured a little now, Mr Bohien told himself. The boy was really valuable--a sort of genius, almost--worth his weight in gold to the firm. Just look at these papers here. Darndest thing you ever saw. Astonishing piece of work. Quite useless, of course. No commercial value. But it proved again the boy's ability.

"It's a sort of confession, I suppose, Mr Bohien. I think it explains why I've always been so... so kind of worried."

"You tell me anything you want, Knipe. I'm here to help you--you know that."

The young man clasped his hands together tight on his lap, hugging himself with his elbows. It seemed as though suddenly he was feeling very cold.

"You see, Mr Bohlen, to tell the honest truth, I don't really care much for my work here. I know I'm good at it and all that sort of thing, but my heart's not in it. It's not what I want to do most."

Up went Mr Bohien's eyebrows, quick like a spring. His whole body became very still.

"You see, sir, all my life I've wanted to be a writer."

"A writer!"

"Yes, Mr Bohien. You may not believe it, but every bit of spare time I've had, I've spent writing stories. In the last ten years I've written hundreds, literally hundreds of short stories. Five hundred and sixty-six, to be precise. Approximately one a week."

"Good heavens, man! What on earth did you do that for?"

"All I know, sir, is I have the urge."

"What sort of urge?"

"The creative urge, Mr Bohien." Every time he looked up he saw Mr Bohien's lips. They were growing thinner and thinner, more and more purple.

"And may I ask you what you do with these stories, Knipe?"

"Well sir, that's the trouble. No one will buy them. Each time I finish one, I send it out on the rounds. It goes to one magazine after another. That's all that happens, Mr Bohien, and they simply send them back. It's very depressing."

Mr Bohien relaxed. "I can see quite well how you feel, my boy." His voice

was dripping with sympathy. "We all go through it one time or another in our lives. But now now that you've had proof--positive proof--from the experts themselves, from the editors, that your stories are--what shall I say--rather unsuccessful, it's time to leave off. Forget it, my boy. Just forget all about it."

"No, Mr Bohien! No! That's not true! I know my stories are good. My heavens, when you compare them with the stuff some of those magazines print--oh my word, Mr Bohien!--the sloppy, boring stuff that you see in the magazines week after week--why, it drives me mad!"

"Now wait a minute, my boy.

"Do you ever read the magazines, Mr Bohien?"

"You'll pardon me, Knipe, but what's all this got to do with your machine?"

"Everything, Mr Bohien, absolutely everything! What I want to tell you is, I've made a study of magazines, and it seems that each one tends to have its own particular type of story. The writers--the successful ones--know this, and they write accordingly."

"Just a minute, my boy. Calm yourself down, will you. I don't think all this is getting us anywhere."

"Please, Mr Bohien, hear me through. It's all terribly important." He paused, to catch his breath. He was properly worked up now, throwing his hands around as he talked. The long, toothy face, with the big ears on either side, simply shone with enthusiasm, and there was an excess of saliva in his mouth which caused him to speak his words wet. "So you see, on my machine, by having an adjustable co-ordinator between the 'plot-memory' section and the 'word-memory' section I am able to produce any type of story I desire simply by pressing the required button."

"Yes, I know, Knipe, I know. This is all very interesting, but what's the point of it?"

"Just this, Mr Bohlen. The market is limited. We've got to be able to produce the right stuff, at the right time, whenever we want it. It's a matter of business, that's all. I'm looking at it from your point of view now--as a commercial proposition."

"My dear boy, it can't possibly be a commercial proposition ever. You know as well as I do what it costs to build one of these machines."

"Yes sir, I do. But with due respect, I don't believe you know what the magazines pay writers for stories."

"What do they pay?"

"Anything up to twenty-five hundred dollars. It probably averages around a thousand."

Mr Bohlen jumped.

"Yes sir, it's true."

"Absolutely impossible, Knipe! Ridiculous!"

"No sir, it's true."

"You mean to sit there and tell me that these magazines pay out money like that to a man for... just for scribbling off a story! Good heavens, Knipe! Whatever next! Writers must all be millionaires!"

"That's exactly it, Mr Bohlen! That's where the machine comes in. Listen a minute, sir, while I tell you some more. I've got it all worked out. The big magazines are carrying approximately three fiction stories in each issue. Now, take the fifteen most important magazines--the ones paying the most money. A few of them are monthlies, but most of them come out every week. All right. That makes, let us say, around forty big stories being bought each week. That's forty thousand dollars. So with our machine when we get it working properly--we can collar nearly the whole of this market!"

"My dear boy, you're mad!"

"No sir, honestly, it's true what I say. Don't you see that with volume alone we'll completely overwhelm them! This machine can produce a five-thousand word story, all typed and ready for despatch, in thirty seconds. How can the writers compete with that? I ask you, Mr Bohien, how?"

At that point, Adolph Knipe noticed a slight change in the man's expression, an extra brightness in the eyes, the nostrils distending, the whole face becoming still, almost rigid. Quickly, he continued. "Nowadays, Mr Bohien, the handmade article hasn't a hope. It can't possibly compete with mass-production, especially in this country you know that. Carpets... chairs shoes... bricks... crockery... anything you like to mention they're all made by machinery now. The quality may be inferior, but that doesn't matter. It's the cost of production that counts. And stories--well--they're just another product, like carpets and chairs, and no one cares how you produce them so long as you deliver the goods. We'll sell them wholesale, Mr Bohlen! We'll undercut every writer in the country! We'll corner the market!"

Mr Bohlen edged up straighter in his chair. He was leaning forward now, both elbows on the desk, the face alert, the small brown eyes resting on the speaker.

"I still think it's impracticable, Knipe."

"Forty thousand a week!" cried Adolph Knipe. "And if we halve the price, making it twenty thousand a week, that's still a million a year!" And softly he added, "You didn't get any million a year for building the old electronic calculator, did you, Mr Bohien?"

"But seriously now, Knipe. D'you really think they'd buy them?"

"Listen, Mr Bohlen. Who on earth is going to want custom-made stories when they can get the other kind at half the price? It stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"And how will you sell them? Who will you say has written them?"

"We'll set up our own literary agency, and we'll distribute them through that. And we'll invent all the names we want for the writers."

"I don't like it, Knipe. To me, that smacks of trickery, does it not?"

"And another thing, Mr Bohlen. There's all manner of valuable by-products once you've got started. Take advertising, for example. Beer manufacturers and people like that are willing to pay good money these days if famous writers will lend their names to their products. Why, my heavens, Mr Bohlen! This isn't any children's plaything we're talking about. It's big business."

"Don't get too ambitious, my boy."

"And another thing. There isn't any reason why we shouldn't put your name, Mr Bohlen, on some of the better stories, if you wished it."

"My goodness, Knipe. What should I want that for?"

"I don't know, sir, except that some writers get to be very much respected--like Mr Erle Gardner or Kathleen Morris, for example. We've got to have names, and I was certainly thinking of using my own on one or two stories, just to help out."

"A writer, eh?" Mr Bohlen said, musing. "Well, it would surely surprise them over at the club when they saw my name in the magazines--the good magazines."

"That's right, Mr Bohien!"

For a moment, a dreamy, faraway look came into Mr Bohien's eyes, and he smiled. Then he stirred himself and began leafing through the plans that lay before him.

"One thing I don't quite understand, Knipe. Where do the plots come from? The machine can't possibly invent plots."

"We feed those in, sir. That's no problem at all. Everyone has plots. There's three or four hundred of them written down in that folder there on your left. Feed them straight into the 'plot-memory' section of the machine."

"Go on."

"There are many other little refinements too, Mr Bohlen. You'll see them all when you study the plans carefully. For example, there's a trick that nearly every writer uses, of inserting at least one long, obscure word into each story. This makes the reader think that the man is very wise and clever. So I have the machine do the same thing. There'll be a whole stack of long words stored away just for this purpose."

"Where?"

"In the 'word-memory' section," he said, epexegetically.

Through most of that day the two men discussed the possibilities of the new engine. In the end, Mr Bohien said he would have to think about it some more. The next morning, he was quietly enthusiastic. Within a week, he was completely sold on the idea.

"What we'll have to do, Knipe, is to say that we're merely building another

r mathematical calculator, but of a new type. That'll keep the secret."

"Exactly, Mr Bohien."

And in six months the machine was completed. It was housed in a separate brick building at the back of the premises, and now that it was ready for action, no one was allowed near it excepting Mr Bohien and Adolph Knipe.

It was an exciting moment when the two men--the one, short, plump, breasted--the other tall, thin and toothy--stood in the corridor before the control panel and got ready to run off the first story. All around them were walls dividing up into many small corridors, and the walls were covered with wiring and plugs and switches and huge glass valves. They were both nervous, Mr Bohlen hopping from one foot to the other, quite unable to keep still. "Which button?" Adolph Knipe asked, eyeing a row of small white discs that resembled the keys of a typewriter. "You choose, Mr Bohlen. Lots of magazines to pick from--Saturday Evening Post, Collier's, Ladies' Home Journal--any one you like."

"Goodness me, boy! How do I know?" He was jumping up and down like a man with hives.

"Mr Bohien," Adolph Knipe said gravely, "do you realize that at this moment, with your little finger alone, you have it in your power to become the most versatile writer on this continent?"

"Listen Knipe, just get on with it, will you please--and cut out the preliminaries."

"Okay, Mr Bohien. Then we'll make it... let me see--this one. How's that?" He extended one finger and pressed down a button with the name TODAY'S WOMAN printed across it in diminutive black type. There was a sharp click, and when he took his finger away, the button remained down, below the level of the others.

"So much for the selection," he said. "Now--here we go!" He reached up and pulled a switch on the panel. Immediately, the room was filled with a loud humming noise, and a crackling of electric sparks, and the jingle of many, tiny, quickly-moving levers; and almost in the same instant, sheets of quarto paper began sliding out from a slot to the right of the control panel and dropping into a basket below. They came out quick, one sheet a second, and in less than half a minute it was all over. The sheets stopped coming.

"That's it!" Adolph Knipe cried. "There's your story!"

They grabbed the sheets and began to read. The first one they picked up started as follows: 'Aifkjmbasaoegweztpplnvoqudskigt&, fuhpekanvbertyuiolkjhgfdsazxcvbnm, peruitrehdjkg mvnb, wmsuy... 'They looked at the others. The style was roughly similar in all of them. Mr Bohien began to shout. The younger man tried to calm him down.

"It's all right, sir. Really it is. It only needs a little adjustment. We've got a connection wrong somewhere, that's all. You must remember, Mr Bohlen,

there's over a million feet of wiring in this room. You can't expect everything to be right first time."

"It'll never work," Mr Bohlen said.

"Be patient, sir. Be patient."

Adolph Knipe set out to discover the fault, and in four days' time he announced that all was ready for the next try.

"It'll never work," Mr Bohien said. "I know it'll never work."

Knipe smiled and pressed the selector button marked Reader's Digest. Then he pulled the switch, and again the strange, exciting, humming sound filled the room. One page of typescript flew out of the slot into the basket.

"Where's the rest?" Mr Bohien cried. "It's Stopped! It's gone wrong!"

"No sir, it hasn't. It's exactly right. It's for the Digest, don't you see?" This time it began. 'Few people yet know that a revolutionary new cure has been discovered which may well bring permanent relief to sufferers of the most dreaded disease of our time... ' And so on.

"It's gibberish!" Mr Bohien shouted.

"No sir, it's fine. Can't you see? It's simply that she's not breaking up the words. That's an easy adjustment. But the story's there. Look, Mr Bohien, look! It's all there except that the words are joined together."

And indeed it was.

On the next try a few days later, everything was perfect, even the punctuation. The first story they ran off, for a famous women's magazine, was a solid, plotty story of a boy who wanted to better himself with his rich employer. This boy arranged, so that story went, for a friend to hold up the rich man's daughter on a dark night when she was driving home. Then the boy himself, happening by, knocked the gun out of his friend's hand and rescued the girl. The girl was grateful. But the father was suspicious. He questioned the boy sharply. The boy broke down and confessed. Then the father, instead of kicking him out of the house, said that he admired the boy's resourcefulness. The girl admired his honesty--and his looks. The father promised him to be head of the Accounts Department. The girl married him.

"It's tremendous, Mr Bohien! It's exactly right!"

"Seems a bit sloppy to me, my boy!"

"No sir, it's a seller, a real seller!"

In his excitement, Adolph Knipe promptly ran off six more stories in as many minutes. All of them--except one, which for some reason came out a trifle lewd--seemed entirely satisfactory.

Mr Bohlen was now mollified. He agreed to set up a literary agency in an office downtown, and to put Knipe in charge. In a couple of weeks, this was accomplished. Then Knipe mailed out the first dozen stories. He put his own name to four of them, Mr Bohien's to one, and for the others he simply invented names.

Five of these stories were promptly accepted. The one with Mr Bohien's name on it was turned down with a letter from the fiction editor saying, 'This is a skilful job, but in our opinion it doesn't quite come off. We would like to see more of this writer's work...' Adolph Knipe took a cab out to the factory and ran off another story for the same magazine. He again put Mr Bohien's name to it, and mailed it immediately. That one they bought.

The money started pouring in. Knipe slowly and carefully stepped up the output, and in six months' time he was delivering thirty stories a week, and selling about half.

He began to make a name for himself in literary circles as a prolific and successful writer. So did Mr Bohlen; but not quite such a good name, although he didn't know it. At the same time, Knipe was building up a dozen or more fictitious persons as promising young authors. Everything was going fine.

At this point it was decided to adapt the machine for writing novels as well as stories. Mr Bohien, thirsting now for greater honours in the literary world, insisted that Knipe go to work at once on this prodigious task.

"I want to do a novel," he kept saying. "I want to do a novel."

"And so you will, sir. And so you will. But please be patient. This is a very complicated adjustment I have to make."

"Everyone tells me I ought to do a novel," Mr Bohien cried. "All sorts of publishers are chasing after me day and night begging me to stop fooling around with stories and do something really important instead. A novel's the only thing that counts--that's what they say."

"We're going to do novels," Knipe told him. "Just as many as we want. But please be patient."

"Now listen to me, Knipe. What I'm going to do is a serious novel, something that'll make 'em sit up and take notice. I've been getting rather tired of the sort of stories you've been putting my name to lately. As a matter of fact, I'm none too sure you haven't been trying to make a monkey out of me."

"A monkey, Mr Bohlen?"

"Keeping all the best ones for yourself, that's what you've been doing."

"Oh no, Mr Bohlen! No!"

"So this time I'm going to make damn sure I write a high class intelligent book. You understand that."

"Look, Mr Bohlen. With the sort of switchboard I'm rigging up, you'll be able to write any sort of book you want." And this was true, for within another couple of months, the genius of Adolph Knipe had not only adapted the machine for novel writing, but had constructed a marvellous new control system which enabled the author to pre-select literally any type of plot and any style of writing he desired. There were so many dials and levers on the thing, it looked like the instrument panel of some enormous aeroplane.

First, by depressing one of a series of master buttons, the writer made his primary decision; historical, satirical, philosophical, political, romantic, erotic, humorous, or straight. Then, from the second row (the basic buttons), he chose his theme: army life, pioneer days, civil war, world war, racial problem, wild west, country life, childhood memories, seafaring, the sea bottom and many, many more. The third row of buttons gave a choice of literary style: classical, whimsical, racy, Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce, feminine, etc. The fourth row was for characters, the fifth for wordage--and so on and so on--ten long rows of pre-selector buttons.

But that wasn't all. Control had also to be exercised during the actual writing process (which took about fifteen minutes per novel), and to do this the author had to sit, as it were, in the driver's seat, and pull (or push) a battery of labelled stops, as on an organ. By so doing, he was able continually to modulate or merge fifty different and variable qualities such as tension, surprise, humour, pathos, and mystery. Numerous dials and gauges on the dashboard itself told him throughout exactly how far along he was with his work.

Finally, there was the question of 'passion'. From a careful study of the best books at the top of the best-seller lists for the past year, Adolph Knipe had decided that this was the most important ingredient of all--a magical catalyst that somehow or other could transform the dullest novel into a howling success at any rate financially. But Knipe also knew that passion was powerful, heady stuff, and must be prudently dispensed--the right proportions at the right moments; and to ensure this, he had devised an independent control consisting of two sensitive sliding adjustors operated by foot-pedals, similar to the throttle and brake in a car. One pedal governed the percentage of passion to be injected, the other regulated its intensity. There was no doubt, of course and this was the only drawback--that the writing of a novel by the Knipe methods was going to be rather like flying a plane and driving a car and playing an organ all at the same time, but this did not trouble the inventor. When all was ready, he proudly escorted Mr Bohlen into the machine house and began to explain the operating procedure for the new wonder.

"Good God, Knipe! I'll never be able to do all that! Dammit man, it'd be easier to write the thing by hand!"

"You'll soon get used to it, Mr Bohlen, I promise you. In a week or two, you'll be doing it without hardly thinking. It's just like learning to drive."

Well, it wasn't quite as easy as that, but after many hours of practice, Mr Bohlen began to get the hang of it, and finally, late one evening, he told Knipe to make ready for running off the first novel. It was a tense moment, with the fat little man crouching nervously in the driver's seat, and the tall tothy Knipe fussing excitedly around him.

"I intend to write an important novel, Knipe."

"I'm sure you will, sir. I'm sure you will."

With one finger, Mr Bohlen carefully pressed the necessary pre-selector buttons: Master button--satirical Subject--racial problem Style--classical Characters--six men, four women, one infant Length fifteen chapters.

At the same time he had his eye particularly upon three organ stops marked power, mystery, profundity.

"Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes, yes, I'm ready."

Knipe pulled the switch. The great engine hummed. There was a deep whirring sound from the oiled movement of fifty thousand cogs and rods and levers; then came the drumming of the rapid electrical typewriter, setting up a shrill, almost intolerable clatter. Out into the basket flew the typewritten pages--one every two seconds. But what with the noise and the excitement and having to play upon the stops, and watch the chapter-counter and the pace-indicator and the passion-gauge, Mr Bohlen began to panic. He reacted in precisely the way a learner driver does in a car--by pressing both feet hard down on the pedals and keeping them there until the thing stopped.

"Congratulations on your first novel," Knipe said, picking up the great bundle of typed pages from the basket.

Little pearls of sweat were oozing out all over Mr Bohlen's face. "It sure was hard work, my boy."

"But you got it done, sir. You got it done."

"Let me see it, Knipe. How does it read?"

He started to go through the first chapter, passing each finished page to the younger man.

"Good heavens, Knipe! What's this!" Mr Bohlen's thin purple fish-lip was moving slightly as it mouthed the words, his cheeks were beginning slowly to inflate.

"But look here, Knipe! This is outrageous!"

"I must say it's a bit fruity, sir."

"Fruity! It's perfectly revolting! I can't possibly put my name to this!"

"Quite right, sir. Quite right!"

"Knipe! Is this some nasty trick you've been playing on me?"

"Oh no, sir! No!"

"It certainly looks like it."

"You don't think, Mr Bohlen, that you mightn't have been pressing a little hard on the passion-control pedals, do you?"

"My dear boy, how should I know."

"Why don't you try another?"

So Mr Bohlen ran off a second novel, and this time it went according to plan.

Within a week, the manuscript had been read and accepted by an enthusiastic publisher. Knipe followed with one in his own name, then made a doze

n more for good measure. In no time at all, Adolph Knipe's Literary Agency had become famous for its large stable of promising young novelists. And once again the money started rolling in.

It was at this stage that young Knipe began to display a real talent for big business.

"See here, Mr Bohien," he said. "We still got too much competition. Why don't we just absorb all the other writers in the country?"

Mr Bohlen, who now sported a bottle-green velvet jacket and allowed his hair to cover two-thirds of his ears, was quite content with things the way they were. "Don't know what you mean, my boy. You can't just absorb writers."

"Of course you can, sir. Exactly like Rockefeller did with his oil companies. Simply buy 'em out, and if they won't sell, squeeze 'em out. It's easy!"

"Careful now, Knipe. Be careful."

"I've got a list here sir, of fifty of the most successful writers in the country, and what I intend to do is offer each one of them a lifetime contract with pay. All they have to do is undertake never to write another word; and, of course, to let us use their names on our own stuff. How about that."

"They'll never agree."

"You don't know writers, Mr Bohien. You watch and see."

"What about the creative urge, Knipe?"

"It's bunk! All they're really interested in is the money--just like everybody else."

In the end, Mr Bohien reluctantly agreed to give it a try, and Knipe, with his list of writers in his pocket, went off in a large chauffeur-driven Cadillac to make his calls.

He journeyed first to the man at the top of the list, a very great and wonderful writer, and he had no trouble getting into the house. He told his story and produced a suitcase full of sample novels, and a contract for the man to sign which guaranteed him so much a year for life. The man listened politely, decided he was dealing with a lunatic, gave him a drink, then firmly showed him to the door.

The second writer on the list, when he saw Knipe was serious, actually attacked him with a large metal paper-weight, and the inventor had to flee down the garden followed by such a torrent of abuse and obscenity as he had never heard before.

But it took more than this to discourage Adolph Knipe. He was disappointed but not dismayed, and off he went in his big car to seek his next client.

This one was a female, famous and popular, whose fat romantic books sold by the million across the country. She received Knipe graciously, gave him tea, and listened attentively to his story.

"It all sounds very fascinating," she said. "But of course I find it a little h

ard to believe."

"Madam," Knipe answered. "Come with me and see it with your own eyes. My car awaits you."

So off they went, and in due course, the astonished lady was ushered into the machine house where the wonder was kept. Eagerly, Knipe explained its workings, and after a while he even permitted her to sit in the driver's seat and practise with the buttons.

"All right," he said suddenly, "you want to do a book now?"

"Oh yes!" she cried. "please!"

She was very competent and seemed to know exactly what she wanted. She made her own pre-selections, then ran off a long, romantic, passion-filled novel. She read through the first chapter and became so enthusiastic that she signed up on the spot.

"That's one of them out of the way," Knipe said to Mr Bohlen afterwards.

"A pretty big one too."

"Nice work, my boy."

"And you know why she signed?"

"Why?"

"It wasn't the money. She's got plenty of that."

"Then why?"

Knipe grinned, lifting his lip and baring a long pale upper gum. "Simply because she saw the machine-made stuff was better than her own."

Thereafter, Knipe wisely decided to concentrate only upon mediocrity. Anything better than that--and there were so few it didn't matter much--was apparently not quite so easy to seduce.

In the end, after several months of work, he had persuaded something like seventy per cent of the writers on his list to sign the contract. He found that the older ones, those who were running out of ideas and had taken to drink, were the easiest to handle. The younger people were more troublesome. They were apt to become abusive, sometimes violent when he approached them; and more than once Knipe was slightly injured on his rounds.

But on the whole, it was a satisfactory beginning. This last year--the first full year of the machine's operation--it was estimated that at least one half of all the novels and stories published in the English language were produced by Adolph Knipe upon the Great Automatic Grammatizator.

Does this surprise you?

I doubt it.

And worse is yet to come. Today, as the secret spreads, many more are hurrying to tie up with Mr Knipe. And all the time the screw turns tighter for those who hesitate to sign their names.

This very moment, as I sit here listening to the howling of my nine starving children in the other room, I can feel my own hand creeping closer and cl

oser to that golden contract that lies over on the other side of the desk.
Give us strength, Oh Lord, to let our children starve.

Claud's Dog

THE RAT CATCHER

IN the afternoon the ratcatcher came to the filling station. He came sidling up the driveway with a stealthy, soft-treading gait, making no noise at all with his feet on the gravel. He had an army knapsack slung over one shoulder and he was wearing an old-fashioned black jacket with large pockets. His brown corduroy trousers were tied around the knees with pieces of white string.

"Yes?" Claud asked, knowing very well who he was.

"Rodent operative." His small dark eyes moved swiftly over the premises.

"The ratcatcher?"

"That's me."

The man was lean and brown with a sharp face and two long sulphur-colored teeth that protruded from the upper jaw, overlapping the lower lip, pressing it inward. The ears were thin and pointed and set far back on the head, near the nape of the neck. The eyes were almost black, but when they looked at you there was a flash of yellow somewhere inside them.

"You've come very quick."

"Special orders from the Health Office."

"And now you're going to catch all the rats?"

"Yep."

The kind of dark furtive eyes he had were those of an animal that lives its life peering out cautiously and forever from a hole in the ground.

"How are you going to catch 'em?"

"Ah-h-h," the ratman said darkly. "That's all accordin' to where they is."

"Trap 'em, I suppose."

"Trap 'em!" he cried, disgusted. "You won't catch many rats that way! Rats isn't rabbits, you know."

He held his face up high, sniffing the air with a nose that twitched perceptibly from side to side.

"No," he said, scornfully. "Trappin's no way to catch a rat. Rats is clever, let me tell you that. If you want to catch 'em, you got to know 'em. You got to know rats on this job."

I could see Claud staring at him with a certain fascination.

"They're more clever'n dogs, rats is."

"Get away."

"You know what they do? They watch you! All the time you're goin' round preparin' to catch 'em, they're sittin' quietly in dark places, watchin' you."

The man crouched, stretching his stringy neck far forward.

"So what do you do?" Claud asked, fascinated.

"Ah! That's it, you see. That's where you got to know rats."

"How d'you catch 'em?"

"There's ways," the ratman said, leering. "There's various ways." He paused, nodding his repulsive head sagely up and down. "It's all dependin'," he said, "on where they is. This ain't a sewer job, is it?"

"No, it's not a sewer job."

"Tricky things, sewer jobs. Yes," he said, delicately sniffing the air to the left of him with his mobile nose-end, "sewer jobs is very tricky things."

"Not especially, I shouldn't think."

"Oh-ho. You shouldn't, shouldn't you! Well, I'd like to see you do a sewer job! Just exactly how would you set about it, I'd like to know?"

"Nothing to it. I'd just poison 'em, that's all."

"And where exactly would you put the poison, might I ask?"

"Down the sewer. Where the hell you think I put it!"

"There!" the ratman cried, triumphant. "I knew it! Down the sewer! And you know what'd happen then? Get washed away, that's all. Sewer's like a river, y'know."

"That's what you say," Claud answered. "That's only what you say."

"It's facts."

"All right, then, all right. So what would you do, Mr Know-all?"

"That's exactly where you got to know rats, on a sewer job."

"Come on then, let's have it."

"Now listen. I'll tell you." The ratman advanced a step closer, his voice became secretive and confidential, the voice of a man divulging fabulous professional secrets. "You works on the understandin' that a rat is a gnawin' animal, see. Rats gnaws. Anythin' you give 'em, don't matter what it is, anythin' new they never seen before, and what do they do? They gnaws it. So now! There you are! You get a sewer job on your hands. And what d'you do?"

His voice had the soft throaty sound of a croaking frog and he seemed to speak all his words with an immense wet-lipped relish, as though they tasted good on the tongue. The accent was similar to Claud's, the broad soft accent of the Buckinghamshire countryside, but his voice was more throaty, the words more fruity in his mouth.

"All you do is you go down the sewer and you take along some ordinary paper bags, just ordinary brown paper bags, and these bags is filled with pl

aster of Paris powder. Nothin' else. Then you suspend the bags from the roof of the sewer so they hang down not quite touchin' the water. See? Not quite touchin', and just high enough so a rat can reach 'em."

Claud was listening, rapt.

"There you are, y'see. Old rat comes swimmin' along the sewer and sees the bag. He stops. He takes a sniff at it and it don't smell so bad anyway. So what's he do then?"

"He gnaws it," Claud cried, delighted.

"There! That's it! That's exactly it! He starts gnawin' away at the bag and the bag breaks and the old rat gets a mouthful of powder for his pains."

"Well?"

"That does him."

"What? Kills him?"

"Yep. Kills him stony!"

"Plaster of Paris ain't poisonous, you know."

"Ah! There you are! That's exactly where you're wrong, see. This powder swells. When you wet it, it swells. Gets into the rat's tubes and swells right up and kills him quicker'n anythin' in the world."

"That's where you got to know rats."

The ratman's face glowed with a stealthy pride, and he rubbed his stringy fingers together, holding the hands up close to the face. Claud watched him, fascinated.

"Now--where's them rats?" The word 'rats' came out of his mouth soft and throaty, with a rich fruity relish as though he were gargling with melted butter. "Let's take a look at them rraats."

"Over there in the hayrick across the road."

"Not in the house?" he asked, obviously disappointed.

"No. Only around the hayrick. Nowhere else."

"I'll wager they're in the house too. Like as not gettin' in all your food in the night and spreadin' disease and sickness. You got any disease here?" he asked, looking first at me, then at Claud.

"Everyone fine here."

"Quite sure?"

"Oh yes."

"You never know, you see. You could be sickenin' for it weeks and weeks and not feel it. Then all of a sudden--bang!--and it's got you. That's why Dr Arbuthnot's so particular. That's why he sent me out so quick, see. To stop the spreadin' of disease."

He had now taken upon himself the mantle of the Health Officer. A most important rat he was now, deeply disappointed that we were not suffering from bubonic plague.

"I feel fine," Claud said, nervously.

The ratman searched his face again, but said nothing.

"And how are you goin' to catch 'em in the hayrick?"

The ratman grinned, a crafty toothy grin. He reached down into his knapsack and withdrew a large tin which he held up level with his face. He peered around one side of it at Claud.

"Poison!" he whispered. But he pronounced it pye-zn, making it into a soft, dark, dangerous word. "Deadly pye-zn, that's what this is!" He was weighing the tin up and down in his hands as he spoke. "Enough here to kill a million men!"

"Terrifying," Claud said.

"Exactly it! They'd put you inside for six months if they caught you with even a spoonful of this," he said, wetting his lips with his tongue. He had a habit of craning his head forward on his neck as he spoke.

"Want to see?" he asked, taking a penny from his pocket, prising open the lid. "There now! There it is!" He spoke fondly, almost lovingly of the stuff, and he held it forward for Claud to look.

"Corn? Or barley is it?"

"It's oats. Soaked in deadly pye-zn. You take just one of them grains in your mouth and you'd be a gonner in five minutes."

"Honest?"

"Yep. Never out of me sight, this tin."

He caressed it with his hands and gave it a little shake so that the oat grains rustled softly inside.

"But not today. Your rats don't get this today. They wouldn't have it anyway. That they wouldn't. There's where you got to know rats. Rats is suspicious. Terrible suspicious, rats is. So today they gets some nice clean tasty oats as'll do 'em no harm in the world. Fatten 'em, that's all it'll do. And tomorrow they gets the same again. And it'll taste so good there'll be all the rats in the districk comin' along after a couple of days."

"Rather clever."

"You got to be clever on this job. You got to be cleverer'n a rat and that's sayin' something."

"You've almost got to be a rat yourself," I said. It slipped out in error, before I had time to stop myself, and I couldn't really help it because I was looking at the man at the time. But the effect upon him was surprising.

"There!" he cried. "Now you got it! Now you really said something! A good ratter's got to be more like a rat than anythin' else in the world! Cleverer even than a rat, and that's not an easy thing to be, let me tell you!"

"Quite sure it's not."

"All right, then let's go. I haven't got all day, you know. There's Lady Leonora Benson asking for me urgent up there at the Manor."

"She got rats, too?"

"Everybody's got rats," the ratman said, and he ambled off down the driveway, across the road to the hayrick and we watched him go. The way he walked was so like a rat it made you wonder--that slow, almost delicate ambling walk with a lot of give at the knees and no sound at all from the footsteps on the gravel. He hopped nimbly over the gate into the field, then walked quickly round the hayrick scattering handfuls of oats on to the ground.

The next day he returned and repeated the procedure.

The day after that he came again and this time he put down the poisoned oats. But he didn't scatter these; he placed them carefully in little piles at each corner of the rick.

"You got a dog?" he asked when he came back across the road on the third day after putting down the poison.

"Yes."

"Now if you want to see your dog die an 'orrible twistin' death, all you got to do is let him in that gate some time."

"We'll take care," Claud told him. "Don't you worry about that."

The next day he returned once more, this time to collect the dead.

"You got an old sack?" he asked. "Most likely we goin' to need a sack to put 'em in."

He was puffed up and important now, the black eyes gleaming with pride. He was about to display the sensational results of his catch to the audience

Claud fetched a sack and the three of us walked across the road, the ratman leading. Claud and I leaned over the gate, watching. The ratman prowled around the hayrick, bending over to inspect his little piles of poison.

"Somethin' wrong here," he muttered. His voice was soft and angry.

He ambled over to another pile and got down on his knees to examine it closely.

"Somethin' bloody wrong here."

"What's the matter?"

He didn't answer, but it was clear that the rats hadn't touched his bait.

"These are very clever rats here," I said.

"Exactly what I told him, Gordon. These aren't just no ordinary kind of rats you're dealing with here."

The ratman walked over to the gate. He was very annoyed and showed it on his face and around the nose and by the way the two yellow teeth were pressing down into the skin of his lower lip. "Don't give me that crap," he said, looking at me. "There's nothing wrong with these rats except somebody's feedin'

'em. They got somethin' juicy to eat somewhere and plenty of it. There's no rats in the world'll turn down oats unless their bellies is full to burstin'."

"They're clever," Claud said.

The man turned away, disgusted. He knelt down again and began to scoop up the poisoned oats with a small shovel, tipping them carefully back into the tin. When he had done, all three of us walked back across the road.

The ratman stood near the petrol-pumps, a rather sorry, humble ratman now whose face was beginning to take on a brooding aspect. He had withdrawn in to himself and was brooding in silence over his failure, the eyes veiled and wicked, the little tongue darting out to one side of the two yellow teeth, keeping the lips moist. It appeared to be essential that the lips should be kept moist. He looked up at me, a quick surreptitious glance, then over at Claud. His nose-end twitched, sniffing the air. He raised himself up and down a few times on his toes, swaying gently, and in a voice soft and secretive, he said: "Want to see somethin'?" He was obviously trying to retrieve his reputation.

"What?"

"Want to see somethin' amazin'?" As he said this he put his right hand into the deep poacher's pocket of his jacket and brought out a large live rat clasped tight between his fingers.

"Good God!"

"Ah! That's it, y'see!" He was crouching slightly now and craning his neck forward and leering at us and holding this enormous brown rat in his hands, one finger and thumb making a tight circle around the creature's neck, clamping its head rigid so it couldn't turn and bite.

"D'you usually carry rats around in your pockets?"

"Always got a rat or two about me somewhere." With that he put his free hand into the other pocket and produced a small white ferret.

"Ferret," he said, holding it up by the neck.

The ferret seemed to know him and stayed still in his grasp.

"There's nothin'll kill a rat quicker'n a ferret. And there's nothin' a rat's more frightened of either."

He brought his hands close together in front of him so that the ferret's nose was within six inches of the rat's face. The pink beady eyes of the ferret stared at the rat. The rat struggled, trying to edge away from the killer.

"Now," he said. "Watch!"

His khaki shirt was open at the neck and he lifted the rat and slipped it down inside his shirt, next to his skin. As soon as his hand was free, he unbuttoned his jacket at the front so that the audience could see the bulge the body of the rat made under his shirt. His belt prevented it from going down lower than his waist.

Then he slipped the ferret in after the rat.

Immediately there was a great commotion inside the shirt. It appeared that the rat was running around the man's body, being chased by the ferret. Six or seven times they went around, the small bulge chasing the larger one, gain

ing on it slightly each circuit and drawing closer and closer until at last the two bulges seemed to come together and there was a scuffle and a series of shrill shrieks.

Throughout this performance the ratman had stood absolutely still with legs apart, arms hanging loosely, the dark eyes resting on Claud's face. Now he reached one hand down into his shirt and pulled out the ferret; with the other he took out the dead rat. There were traces of blood around the white muzzle of the ferret.

"Not sure I liked that very much."

"You never seen anythin' like it before, I'll bet you that."

"Can't really say I have."

"Like as not you'll get yourself a nasty little nip in the guts one of these days," Claud told him. But he was clearly impressed, and the ratman was becoming cocky again.

"Want to see somethin' far more amazin' than that?" he asked. "You want to see somethin' you'd never even believe unless you seen it with your own eyes?"

"Well?"

We were standing in the driveway out in front of the pumps and it was one of those pleasant warm November mornings. Two cars pulled in for petrol, one right after the other, and Claud went over and gave them what they wanted.

"You want to see?" the ratman asked.

I glanced at Claud, slightly apprehensive. "Yes," Claud said. "Come on then, let's see."

The ratman slipped the dead rat back into one pocket, the ferret into the other. Then he reached down into his knapsack and produced--if you please--a second live rat.

"Good Christ!" Claud said.

"Always got one or two rats about me somewhere," the man announced calmly. "You got to know rats on this job, and if you want to know 'em you got to have 'em round you. This is a sewer rat, this is. An old sewer rat, clever as buggery. See him watchin' me all the time, wonderin' what I'm goin' to do? See him?"

"Very unpleasant."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. I had a feeling I was going to like this one even less than the last.

"Fetch me a piece of string."

Claud fetched him a piece of string.

With his left hand, the man looped the string around one of the rat's hind legs. The rat struggled, trying to turn its head to see what was going on, but he held it tight around the neck with finger and thumb.

"Now!" he said, looking about him. "You got a table inside?"

"We don't want the rat inside the house," I said.

"Well--I need a table. Or somethin' flat like a table."

"What about the bonnet of that car?" Claud said.

We walked over to the car and the man put the old sewer rat on the bonnet. He attached the string to the windshield wiper so that the rat was now tethered.

At first it crouched, unmoving and suspicious, a big-bodied grey rat with bright black eyes and a scaly tail that lay in a long curl upon the car's bonnet. It was looking away from the ratman, but watching him sideways to see what he was going to do. The man stepped back a few paces and immediately the rat relaxed. It sat up on its haunches and began to lick the grey fur on its chest. Then it scratched its muzzle with both front paws. It seemed quite unconcerned about the three men standing near by.

"Now--how about a little bet?" the ratman asked.

"We don't bet," I said.

"Just for fun. It's more fun if you bet."

"What d'you want to bet on?"

"I'll bet you I can kill that rat without usin' my hands. I'll put my hands in my pockets and not use 'em."

"You'll kick it with your feet," Claud said.

It was apparent that the ratman was out to earn some money. I looked at the rat that was going to be killed and began to feel slightly sick, not so much because it was going to be killed but because it was going to be killed in a special way, with a considerable degree of relish.

"No," the ratman said. "No feet."

"Nor arms?" Claud asked.

"Nor arms. Nor legs, nor hands neither."

"You'll sit on it."

"No. No squashin'."

"Let's see you do it."

"You bet me first. Bet me a quid."

"Don't be so bloody daft," Claud said. "Why should we give you a quid?"

"What'll you bet?"

"Nothin'."

"All right. Then it's no go."

He made as if to untie the string from the windshield wiper.

"I'll bet you a shilling," Claud told him. The sick gastric sensation in my stomach was increasing, but there was an awful magnetism about this business and I found myself quite unable to walk away or even move.

"You too?"

"No," I said.

"What's the matter with you?" the ratman asked.

"I just don't want to bet you, that's all."

"So you want me to do this for a lousy shillin'?"

"I don't want you to do it."

"Where's the money?" he said to Claud.

Claud put a shilling piece on the bonnet, near the radiator. The ratman produced two sixpences and laid them beside Claud's money. As he stretched out his hand to do this, the rat cringed, drawing its head back and flattening itself against the bonnet.

"Bet's on," the ratman said.

Claud and I stepped back a few paces. The ratman stepped forward. He put his hands in his pockets and inclined his body from the waist so that his face was on a level with the rat, about three feet away.

His eyes caught the eyes of the rat and held them. The rat was crouching, very tense, sensing extreme danger, but not yet frightened. The way it crouched, it seemed to me it was preparing to spring forward at the man's face; but there must have been some power in the ratman's eyes that prevented it from doing this, and subdued it, and then gradually frightened it so that it began to back away, dragging its body backwards with slow crouching steps until the string tautened on its hind leg. It tried to struggle back further against the string, jerking its leg to free it. The man leaned forward towards the rat, following it with his face, watching it all the time with his eyes, and suddenly the rat panicked and leaped sideways in the air. The string pulled it up with a jerk that must almost have dislocated its leg.

It crouched again, in the middle of the bonnet, as far away as the string would allow, and it was properly frightened now, whiskers quivering, the long grey body tense with fear.

At this point, the ratman again began to move his face closer. Very slowly he did it, so slowly there wasn't really any movement to be seen at all except that the face just happened to be a fraction closer each time you looked. He never took his eyes from the rat. The tension was considerable and I wanted suddenly to cry out and tell him to stop. I wanted him to stop because it was making me feel sick inside, but I couldn't bring myself to say the word. Something extremely unpleasant was about to happen I was sure of that. Something sinister and cruel and ratlike, and perhaps it really would make me sick. But I had to see it now.

The ratman's face was about eighteen inches from the rat. Twelve inches. Then ten, or perhaps it was eight, and then there was not more than the length of a man's hand separating their faces. The rat was pressing its body flat against the car bonnet, tense and terrified. The ratman was also tense, but with a dangerous active tensivity that was like a tight-wound spring. The s

shadow of a smile flickered around the skin of his mouth.

Then suddenly he struck.

He struck as a snake strikes, darting his head forward with one swift knife-like stroke that originated in the muscles of the lower body, and I had a momentary glimpse of his mouth opening very wide and two yellow teeth and the whole face contorted by the effort of mouth-opening.

More than that I did not care to see. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the rat was dead and the ratman was slipping the money into his pocket and spitting to clear his mouth.

"That's what they makes lickerish out of," he said. "Rat's blood is what the big factories and the chocolate-people use to make lickerish."

Again the relish, the wet-lipped, lip-smacking relish as he spoke the words, the throaty richness of his voice and the thick syrupy way he pronounced the word lickerish.

"No," he said, "there's nothin' wrong with a drop of rat's blood."

"Don't talk so absolutely disgusting," Claud told him.

"Ah! But that's it, you see. You eaten it many a time. Penny sticks and lickerish bootlaces is all made from rat's blood."

"We don't want to hear about it, thank you."

"Boiled up, it is, in great cauldrons, bubblin' and steamin' and men stirrin' it with long poles. That's one of the big secrets of the chocolate-makin' factories, and no one knows about it--no one except the ratters supplyin' the stuff."

Suddenly he noticed that his audience was no longer with him, that our faces were hostile and sick-looking and crimson with anger and disgust. He stopped abruptly, and without another word he turned and sloped off down the driveway out on to the road, moving with the slow, that almost delicate ambling walk that was like a rat prowling, making no noise with his footsteps even on the gravel of the driveway.

RUMMINS

The sun was up over the hills now and the mist had cleared and it was wonderful to be striding along the road with the dog in the early morning, especially when it was autumn, with the leaves changing to gold and yellow and sometimes one of them breaking away and falling slowly, turning slowly over in the air, dropping noiselessly right in front of him on to the grass beside the road. There was a small wind up above, and he could hear the beeches rustling and murmuring like a crowd of people.

This was always the best time of the day for Claud Cabbage. He gazed app

rovingly at the rippling velvety hindquarters of the greyhound trotting in front of him.

"Jackie," he called softly. "Hey, Jackson. How you feeling, boy?"

The dog half turned at the sound of its name and gave a quick acknowledging wag of the tail.

There would never be another dog like this Jackie, he told himself. How beautiful the slim streamlining, the small pointed head, the yellow eyes, the black mobile nose. Beautiful the long neck, the way the deep brisket curved back and up out of sight into no stomach at all. See how he walked upon his toes, noiselessly, hardly touching the surface of the road at all.

"Jackson," he said. "Good old Jackson."

In the distance, Claud could see Rummins' farmhouse, small, narrow, and ancient, standing back behind the hedge on the right-hand side.

I'll turn round there, he decided. That'll be enough for today.

Rummins, carrying a pail of milk across the yard, saw him coming down the road. He set the pail down slowly and came forward to the gate, leaning both arms on the topmost bar, waiting.

"Morning, Mr Rummins," Claud said. It was necessary to be polite to Rummins because of eggs.

Rummins nodded and leaned over the gate, looking critically at the dog.

"Looks well," he said.

"He is well."

"When's he running?"

"I don't know, Mr Rummins."

"Come on. When's he running?"

"He's only ten months yet, Mr Rummins. He's not even schooled properly, honest."

The small beady eyes of Rummins peered suspiciously over the top of the gate. "I wouldn't mind betting a couple of quid you're having it off with him somewhere secret soon."

Claud moved his feet uncomfortably on the black road surface. He disliked very much this man with the wide frog mouth, the broken teeth, the shifty eyes; and most of all he disliked having to be polite to him because of eggs.

"That hayrick of yours opposite," he said, searching desperately for another subject. "It's full of rats."

"All hayricks got rats."

"Not like this one. Matter of fact we've been having a touch of trouble with the authorities about that."

Rummins glanced up sharply. He didn't like trouble with the authorities. Any man who sells eggs blackmarket and kills pigs without a permit is wise to avoid contact with that sort of people.

"What kind of trouble?"

"They sent the ratcatcher along."

"You mean just for a few rats?"

"A few! Blimey, it's swarming!"

"Never."

"Honest it is, Mr Rummins. There's hundreds of 'em."

"Didn't the ratcatcher catch 'em?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I reckon they're too artful."

Rummins began thoughtfully to explore the inner rim of one nostril with the end of his thumb, holding the nose flap between thumb and finger as he did so.

"I wouldn't give thank you for no ratcatchers," he said. "Ratcatchers is government men working for the soddin' government and I wouldn't give thank you for 'em."

"Nor me, Mr Rummins. All ratcatchers is slimy cunning creatures."

"Well," Rummins said, sliding fingers under his cap to scratch the head, "I was coming over soon anyway to fetch in that rick. Reckon I might just as well do it today as any other time. I don't want no government men nosing around my stuff thank you very much."

"Exactly, Mr Rummins."

"We'll be over later--Bert and me." With that he turned and ambled off across the yard.

Around three in the afternoon, Rummins and Bert were seen riding slowly up the road in a cart drawn by a ponderous and magnificent black carthorse. Opposite the filling-station the cart turned off into the field and stopped near the hayrick.

"This ought to be worth seeing," I said. "Get the gun."

Claud fetched the rifle and slipped a cartridge into the breech.

I strolled across the road and leaned against the open gate. Rummins was on the top of the rick now and cutting away at the cord that bound the thatching. Bert remained in the cart, fingering the four-foot-long knife.

Bert had something wrong with one eye. It was pale grey all over, like a boiled fish-eye, and although it was motionless in its socket it appeared always to be looking at you and following you round the way the eyes of the people in some of those portraits do, in the museums. Wherever you stood and wherever Bert was looking, there was this faulty eye fixing you sideways with a cold stare, boiled and misty pale with a little black dot in the centre, like a fish-eye on a plate.

In his build he was the opposite of his father who was short and squat like a frog. Bert was a tall, reedy, boneless boy, loose at the joints, even the

head loose upon the shoulders, falling sideways as though perhaps it was too heavy for the neck.

"You only made this rick last June," I said to him. "Why take it away so soon?"

"Dad wants it."

"Funny time to cut a new rick, November."

"Dad wants it," Bert repeated, and both his eyes, the sound one and the other stared down at me with a look of absolute vacuity.

"Going to all that trouble stacking it and thatching it and then pulling it down five months later."

"Dad wants it." Bert's nose was running and he kept wiping it with the back of his hand and wiping the back of the hand on his trousers.

"Come on, Bert," Rummins called, and the boy climbed up on to the rick and stood in the place where the thatch had been removed. He took the knife and began to cut down into the tight-packed hay with an easy-swinging, sawing movement, holding the handle with both hands and rocking his body like a man sawing wood with a big saw. I could hear the crisp cutting noise of the blade against the dry hay and the noise becoming softer as the knife sank deeper into the rick.

"Claud's going to take a pot at the rats as they come out."

The man and the boy stopped abruptly and looked across the road at Claud who was leaning against the red pump with rifle in hand.

"Tell him to put that bloody rifle away," Rummins said.

"He's a good shot. He won't hit you."

"No one's potting no rats alongside of me, don't matter how good they are ."

"You'll insult him."

"Tell him to put it away," Rummins said, slow and hostile, "I don't mind dogs nor sticks but I'll be buggered if I'll have rifles."

The two on the hayrick watched while Claud did as he was told, then they resumed their work in silence. Soon Bert came down into the cart, and reaching out with both hands he pulled a slice of solid hay away from the rick so that it dropped neatly into the cart beside him.

A rat, grey-black, with a long tail, came out of the base of the rick and ran into the hedge.

"A rat," I said.

"Kill it," Rummins said. "Why don't you get a stick and kill it?"

The alarm had been given now and the rats were coming out quicker, one or two of them every minute, fat and long-bodied, crouching close to the ground as they ran through the grass into the hedge. Whenever the horse saw one of them it twitched its ears and followed it with uneasy rolling eyes.

Bert had climbed back on top of the rick and was cutting out another bal

e. Watching him, I saw him suddenly stop, hesitate for perhaps a second, then again begin to cut, but very cautiously this time, and now I could hear a different sound, a muffled rasping noise as the blade of the knife grated against something hard.

Bert pulled out the knife and examined the blade, testing it with his thumb. He put it back, letting it down gingerly into the cut, feeling gently downward until it came again upon the hard object; and once more, when he made another cautious little sawing movement, there came that grating sound.

Rummins turned his head and looked over his shoulder at the boy. He was in the act of lifting an armful of loosened thatch, bending forward with both hands grasping the straw, but he stopped dead in the middle of what he was doing and looked at Bert. Bert remained still, hands holding the handle of the knife, a look of bewilderment on his face. Behind, the sky was a pale clear blue and the two figures up there on the hayrick stood out sharp and black like an etching against the paleness.

Then Rummins' voice, louder than usual, edged with an unmistakable apprehension that the loudness did nothing to conceal: "Some of them haymakers is too bloody careless what they put on a rick these days."

He paused, and again the silence, the men motionless, and across the road Claud leaning motionless against the red pump. It was so quiet suddenly we could hear a woman's voice far down the valley on the next farm calling the men to food.

Then Rummins again, shouting where there was no need to shout: "Go on, then! Go on an' cut through it, Bert! A little stick of wood won't hurt the soddin' knife!"

For some reason, as though perhaps scenting trouble, Claud came strolling across the road and joined me leaning on the gate. He didn't say anything, but both of us seemed to know that there was something disturbing about these two men, about the stillness that surrounded them and especially about Rummins himself. Rummins was frightened. Bert was frightened too. And now as I watched them, I became conscious of a small vague image moving just below the surface of my memory. I tried desperately to reach back and grasp it. Once I almost touched it, but it slipped away and when I went after it I found myself travelling back and back through many weeks, back into the yellow days of summer--the warm wind blowing down the valley from the south, the big beech trees heavy with their foliage, the fields turning 'to gold, the harvesting, the haymaking, the rick--the building of the rick.

Instantly I felt a fine electricity of fear running over the skin of my stomach.

Yes--the building of the rick. When was it we had built it? June? That was it, of course a hot muggy day in June with the clouds low overhead and the air thick with the smell of thunder.

And Rummins had said, "Let's for God's sake get it in quick before the rain comes."

And Ole Jimmy had said, "There ain't going to be no rain. And there ain't no hurry either. You know very well when thunder's in the south it don't cross over into the valley."

Rummins, standing up in the cart handing out the pitch-forks, had not answered him. He was in a furious brooding temper because of his anxiety about getting in the hay before it rained.

"There ain't gin' to be no rain before evening," Ole Jimmy had repeated, looking at Rummins; and Rummins had stared back at him, the eyes glimmering with a slow anger.

All through the morning we had worked without a pause, loading the hay into the cart, trundling it across the field, pitching it out on to the slowly growing rick that stood over by the gate opposite the filling-station. We could hear the thunder in the south as it came towards us and moved away again. Then it seemed to return and remain stationary somewhere beyond the hills, rumbling intermittently. When we looked up we could see the clouds overhead moving and changing shape in the turbulence of the upper air, but on the ground it was hot and muggy and there was no breath of wind. We worked slowly, listlessly in the heat, shirts wet with sweat, faces shining.

Claud and I had worked beside Rummins on the rick itself, helping to shape it, and I could remember how very hot it had been and the flies around my face and the sweat pouring out everywhere; and especially I could remember the grim scowling presence of Rummins beside me, working with a desperate urgency and watching the sky and shouting at the men to hurry.

At noon, in spite of Rummins, we had knocked off for lunch.

Claud and I had sat down under the hedge with Ole Jimmy and another man called Wilson who was a soldier home on leave, and it was too hot to do much talking. Wilson had some bread and cheese and a canteen of cold tea. Ole Jimmy had a satchel that was an old gas-mask container, and in this, closely packed, standing upright with their necks protruding, were six pint bottles of beer.

"Come on," he said, offering a bottle to each of us.

"I'd like to buy one from you," Claud said, knowing very well the old man had little money.

"Take it."

"I must pay you."

"Don't be so daft. Drink it."

He was a very good old man, good and clean, with a clean pink face that he shaved each day. He had used to be a carpenter, but they retired him at the age of seventy and that was some years before. Then the Village Council, seeing him still active, had given him the job of looking after the newly bu

ilt children's playground, of maintaining the swings and see-saws in good repair and also of acting as a kind of gentle watchdog, seeing that none of the kids hurt themselves or did anything foolish.

That was a fine job for an old man to have and everybody seemed pleased with the way things were going--until a certain Saturday night. That night Ole Jimmy had got drunk and gone reeling and singing down the middle of the High Street with such a howling noise that people got out of their beds to see what was going on below. The next morning they had sacked him saying he was a waster and a drunkard not fit to associate with young children on the playground.

But then an astonishing thing happened. The first day that he stayed away--a Monday it was--not one single child came near the playground.

Nor the next day, nor the one after that.

All week the swings and the see-saws and the high slide with steps going up to it stood deserted. Not a child went near them. Instead they followed Ole Jimmy out into a field behind the Rectory and played their games there with him watching; and the result of all this was that after a while the Council had had no alternative but to give the old man back his job.

He still had it now and he still got drunk and no one said anything about it any more. He left it only for a few days each year, at haymaking time. All his life Ole Jimmy had loved to go haymaking and he wasn't going to give it up yet.

"You want one?" he asked now, holding a bottle out to Wilson, the soldier

"No thanks. I got tea."

"They say tea's good on a hot day."

"It is. Beer makes me sleepy."

"If you like," I said to Ole Jimmy, "we could walk across to the filling-station and I'll do you a couple of nice sandwiches? Would you like that?"

"Beer's plenty. There's more food in one bottle of beer, me lad, than twenty sandwiches."

He smiled at me, showing two rows of palepink, toothless gums, but it was a pleasant smile and there was nothing repulsive about the way the gums showed.

We sat for a while in silence. The soldier finished his bread and cheese and lay back on the ground, tilting his hat forward over his face. Ole Jimmy had drunk three bottles of beer, and now he offered the last to Claud and me.

"No thanks."

"No thanks. One's plenty for me."

The old man shrugged, unscrewed the stopper, tilted his head back and drank, pouring the beer into his mouth with the lips held open so the liquid r

an smoothly without gurgling down his throat. He wore a hat that was of no colour at all and of no shape, and it did not fall off when he tilted back his head.

"Ain't Rummins goin' to give that old horse a drink?" he asked, lowering the bottle, looking across the field at the great carthorse that stood steaming between the shafts of the cart.

"Not Rummins."

"Horses is thirsty, just the same as us." Ole Jimmy paused, still looking at the horse. "You got a bucket of water in that place of yours there?"

"Of course."

"No reason why we shouldn't give the old horse a drink then, is there?"

"That's a very good idea. We'll give him a drink."

Claud and I both stood up and began walking towards the gate, and I remember turning and calling to the old man: "You quite sure you wouldn't like me to bring you a nice sandwich? Won't take a second to make."

He shook his head and waved the bottle at us and said something about taking himself a little nap. We went on through the gate over the road to the filling station.

I suppose we stayed away for about an hour attending to customers and getting ourselves something to eat, and when at length we returned, Claud carrying the bucket of water, I noticed that the rick was at least six foot high.

"Some water for the old horse," Claud said, looking hard at Rummins who was up in the cart pitching hay on to the rick.

The horse put its head in the bucket, sucking and blowing gratefully at the water.

"Where's Ole Jimmy?" I asked. We wanted the old man to see the water because it had been his idea.

When I asked the question there was a moment, a brief moment, when Rummins hesitated, pitchfork in mid-air, looking around him.

"I brought him a sandwich," I added. "Bloody old fool drunk too much beer and gone off home to sleep," Rummins said.

I strolled along the hedge back to the place where we had been sitting with Ole Jimmy. The five empty bottles were lying there in the grass. So was the satchel. I picked up the satchel and carried it back to Rummins.

"I don't think Ole Jimmy's gone home, Mr Rummins," I said, holding up the satchel by the long shoulder-band. Rummins glanced at it but made no reply. He was in a frenzy of haste now because the thunder was closer, the clouds blacker, the heat more oppressive than ever.

Carrying the satchel, I started back to the filling station where I remained for the rest of the afternoon, serving customers. Towards evening, when the rain came, I glanced across the road and noticed that they had got the hay in and were laying a tarpaulin over the rick.

In a few days the thatcher arrived and took the tarpaulin off and made a roof of straw instead. He was a good thatcher and he made a fine roof with long straw, thick and well-packed. The slope was nicely angled, the edges cleanly clipped, and it was a pleasure to look at it from the road or from the door of the filling station.

All this came flooding back to me now as clearly as if it were yesterday --the building of the rick on that hot thundery day in June, the yellow field, the sweet woody smell of the hay; and Wilson the soldier, with tennis shoes on his feet, Bert with the boiled eye, Ole Jimmy with the clean old face, the pink naked gums; and Rummins, the broad dwarf, standing up in the cart scowling at the sky because he was anxious about the rain.

At this very moment, there he was again, this Rummins, crouching on top of the rick with a sheaf of thatch in his arms looking round at the son, the tall Bert, motionless also, both of them black like silhouettes against the sky, and once again I felt the fine electricity of fear as it came and went in little waves over the skin of my stomach.

"Go on and cut through it, Bert," Rummins said, speaking loudly.

Bert put pressure on the big knife and there was a high grating noise as the edge of the blade sawed across something hard. It was clear from Bert's face that he did not like what he was doing.

It took several minutes before the knife was through--then again at last the softer sound of the blade slicing the tight-packed hay and Bert's face turned sideways to the father, grinning with relief, nodding inanely.

"Go on and cut it out," Rummins said, and still he did not move.

Bert made a second vertical cut the same depth as the first; then he got down and pulled the bale of hay so it came away cleanly from the rest of the rick like a chunk of cake, dropping into the cart at his feet.

Instantly the boy seemed to freeze, staring stupidly at the newly exposed face of the rick, unable to believe or perhaps refusing to believe what this thing was that he had cut in two. Rummins, who knew very well what it was, had turned away and was climbing quickly down the other side of the rick. He moved so fast he was through the gate and half-way across the road before Bert started to scream.

MR HODDY

They got out of the car and went in the front door of Mr Hoddy's house.

"I've an idea Dad's going to question you rather sharp tonight," Glance whispered.

"About what, Glance?"

"The usual stuff. Jobs and things like that. And whether you can support me in a fitting way."

"Jackie's going to do that," Claud said. "When Jackie wins there won't be any need for any jobs... "Don't you ever mention Jackie to my dad, Claud Cabbage, or that'll be the end of it. If there's one thing in the world he can't abide it's greyhounds. Don't you ever forget that."

"Oh Christ," Claud said.

"Tell him something else anything--anything to make him happy, see?" And with that she led Claud into the parlour.

Mr Hoddy was a widower, a man with a prim sour mouth and an expression of eternal disapproval all over his face. He had the small, close-together teeth of his daughter Glance, the same suspicious, inward look about the eyes, but none of her freshness and vitality, none of her warmth. He was a small sour apple of a man, grey-skinned and shrivelled, with a dozen or so surviving strands of black hair pasted across the dome of his bald head. But a very superior man was Mr Hoddy, a grocer's assistant, one who wore a spotless white gown at his work, who handled large quantities of such precious commodities as butter and sugar, who was deferred to, even smiled at by every housewife in the village.

Claud Cabbage was never quite at his ease in this house and that was precisely as Mr Hoddy intended it. They were sitting round the fire in the parlour with cups of tea in their hands, Mr Hoddy in the best chair to the right of the fireplace, Claud and Glance on the sofa, decorously separated by a wide space. The younger daughter, Ada, was on a hard upright chair to the left, and they made a little circle round the fire, a stiff, tense little circle, primly tea-sipping.

"Yes, Mr Hoddy," Claud was saying, "you can be quite sure both Gordon and me's got quite a number of nice little ideas up our sleeves this very moment. It's only a question of taking our time and making sure which is going to be the most profitable."

"What sort of ideas?" Mr Hoddy asked, fixing Claud with his small, disapproving eyes.

"Ah, there you are now. That's it, you see." Claud shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. His blue lounge suit was tight around his chest, and it was especially tight between his legs, up in the crutch. The tightness in his crutch was actually painful to him and he wanted terribly to hitch it downward.

"This man you call Gordon, I thought he had a profitable business out here as it is," Mr Hoddy said. "Why does he want to change?"

"Absolutely right, Mr Hoddy. It's a first-rate business. But it's a good thing to keep expanding, see. New ideas is what we're after. Something I can come in on as well and take a share of the profits."

"Such as what?"

Mr Hoddy was eating a slice of currant cake, nibbling it round the edges, and his small mouth was like the mouth of a caterpillar biting a tiny curved slice out of the edge of a leaf.

"Such as what?" he asked again.

"There's long conferences, Mr Hoddy, takes place every day between Gordon and me about these different matters of business."

"Such as what?" he repeated, relentless.

Glance glanced sideways at Claud, encouraging. Claud turned his large slow eyes upon Mr Hoddy, and he was silent. He wished Mr Hoddy wouldn't push him around like this, always shooting questions at him and glaring at him and acting just exactly like he was the bloody adjutant or something.

"Such as what?" Mr Hoddy said, and this time Claud knew that he was not going to let go. Also, his instinct warned him that the old man was trying to create a crisis.

"Well now," he said, breathing deep. "I don't really want to go into details until we got it properly worked out. All we're doing so far is turning our ideas over in our minds, see."

"All I'm asking," Mr Hoddy said irritably, "is what sort of business are you contemplating? I presume that it's respectable?"

"Now please, Mr Hoddy. You don't for one moment think we'd even so much as consider anything that wasn't absolutely and entirely respectable, do you?"

Mr Hoddy grunted, stirring his tea slowly, watching Claud. Glance sat mute and fearful on the sofa, gazing into the fire.

"I've never been in favour of starting a business," Mr Hoddy pronounced, defending his own failure in that line. "A good respectable job is all a man should wish for. A respectable job in respectable surroundings. Too much hokey-pokey in business for my liking."

"The thing is this," Claud said, desperate now. "All I want is to provide my wife with everything she can possibly desire. A house to live in and furniture and a flower garden and a washing-machine and all the best things in the world. That's what I want to do, and you can't do that on an ordinary wage, now can you? It's impossible to get enough money to do that unless you go into business, Mr Hoddy. You'll surely agree with me there?"

Mr Hoddy, who had worked for an ordinary wage all his life, didn't much like this point of view.

"And don't you think I provide everything my family wants, might I ask?"

"Oh, yes, and more!" Claud cried fervently. "But you've got a very superior job, Mr Hoddy, and that makes all the difference."

"But what sort of business are you thinking of?" the man persisted.

Claud sipped his tea to give himself a little more time and he couldn't h

elp wondering how the miserable old bastard's face would look if he simply up and told him the truth right there and then, if he'd said what we've got Mr Hoddy, if you really wants to know, is a couple of greyhounds and one's a perfect ringer for the other and we're going to bring off the biggest goddam gamble in the history of flapping, see. He'd like to watch the old bastard's face if he said that, he really would.

They were all waiting for him to proceed now, sitting there with cups of tea in their hands staring at him and waiting for him to say something good. "Well," he said, speaking very slowly because he was thinking deep. "I've been pondering something a long time now, something as'll make more money even than Gordon's secondhand cars or anything else come to that, and practically no expense involved." That's better, he told himself. Keep going a long like that.

"And what might that be?"

"Something so queer, Mr Hoddy, there isn't one in a million would even believe it."

"Well, what is it?" Mr Hoddy placed his cup carefully on the little table beside him and leaned forward to listen. And Claud, watching him, knew more than ever that this man and all those like him were his enemies. It was the Mr Hoddys were the trouble. They were all the same. He knew them all, with their clean ugly hands, their grey skin, their acrid mouths, their tendency to develop little round bulging bellies just below the waistcoat; and always the unctuous curl of the nose, the weak chin, the suspicious eyes that were dark and moved too quick. The Mr Hoddys. Oh, Christ.

"Well, what is it?"

"It's an absolute gold-mine, Mr Hoddy, honestly it is."

"I'll believe that when I hear it."

"It's a thing so simple and amazing most people wouldn't even bother to do it." He had it now--something he had actually been thinking seriously about for a long time, something he'd always wanted to do. He leaned across and put his teacup carefully on the table beside Mr Hoddy's, then, not knowing what to do with his hands, placed them on his knees, palms downward.

"Well, come on man, what is it?"

"It's maggots," Claud answered softly.

Mr Hoddy jerked back as though someone had squirted water in his face. "Maggots!" he said, aghast. "Maggots? What on earth do you mean, maggots?" Claud had forgotten that this word was almost unmentionable in any self-respecting grocer's shop. Ada began to giggle, but Clarice glanced at her so malignantly the giggle died on her mouth.

"That's where the money is, starting a maggot factory."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"Honestly, Mr Hoddy, it may sound a bit queer, and that's simply because y

ou never heard it before, but it's a little gold-mine."

"A maggot-factory! Really now, Cabbage! Please be sensible!"

Glance wished her father wouldn't call him Cabbage.

"You never heard speak of a maggot-factory, Mr Hoddy?"

"I certainly have not!"

"There's maggot-factories going now, real big companies with managers and directors and all, and you know what, Mr Hoddy? They're making millions!"

"Nonsense, man."

"And you know why they're making millions?" Claud paused, but he did not notice now that his listener's face was slowly turning yellow. "It's because of the enormous demand for maggots, Mr Hoddy."

At that moment Mr Hoddy was listening also to other voices, the voices of his customers across the counter--Mrs Rabbits, for instance, as he sliced off her ration of butter, Mrs Rabbits with her brown moustache and always talking so loud and saying well, well, well; he could hear her now saying "Well, well, well Mr Hoddy, so your Clarice got married last week, did she. Very nice too, I must say, and what was it you said her husband does, Mr Hoddy?"

He owns a maggot-factory, Mrs Rabbits.

No, thank you, he told himself, watching Claud with his small, hostile eyes. No thank you very much indeed. I don't want that.

"I can't say," he announced primly, "that I myself have ever had occasion to purchase a maggot."

"Now you come to mention it, Mr Hoddy, nor have I. Nor has many other people we know. But let me ask you something else. How many times you have occasion to purchase... a crown wheel and pinion, for instance?"

This was a shrewd question and Claud permitted himself a slow mawkish smile.

"What's that got to do with maggots?"

"Exactly this--that certain people buy certain things, see. You never bought a crown wheel and pinion in your life, but that don't say there isn't men getting rich this very moment making them--because there is. It's the same with maggots!"

"Would you mind telling me who these unpleasant people are who buy maggots?"

"Maggots are bought by fishermen, Mr Hoddy. Amateur fishermen. There's thousands and thousands of fishermen all over the country going out every week-end fishing the rivers and all of them wanting maggots. Willing to pay good money for them, too. You go along the river there anywhere you like above Marlow on a Sunday and you'll see them lining the banks. Sitting there one beside the other simply lining the banks of both sides."

"Those men don't buy maggots. They go down the bottom of the garden and dig worms."

"Now that's just where you're wrong, Mr Hoddy, if you'll allow me to say so. That's just where you're absolutely wrong. They want maggots, not worms."

"In that case they get their own maggots."

"They don't want to get their own maggots. Just imagine Mr Hoddy, it's Saturday afternoon and you're going out fishing and a nice clean tin of maggots arrives by post and all you've got to do is slip it in the fishing bag and away you go. You don't think fellers is going out digging for worms and hunting for maggots when they can have them delivered right to their very door steps like that just for a bob or two, do you?"

"And might I ask how you propose to run this maggot-factory of yours?" When he spoke the word maggot, it seemed as if he were spitting out a sour little pip from his mouth.

"Easiest thing in the world to run a maggotfactory." Claud was gaining confidence now and warming to his subject. "All you need is a couple of old oil drums and a few lumps of rotten meat or a sheep's head, and you put them in the oil drums and that's all you do. The flies do the rest."

Had he been watching Mr Hoddy's face he would probably have stopped there.

"Of course, it's not quite as easy as it sounds. What you've got to do next is feed up your maggots with special diet. Bran and milk. And then when they get big and fat you put them in pint tins and post them off to your customers. Five shillings a pint they fetch. Five shillings a pint!" he cried, slapping the knee. "You just imagine that, Mr Hoddy! And they say one bluebottle' !! lay twenty pints easy!"

He paused again, but merely to marshal his thoughts, for there was no stopping him now. "And there's another thing, Mr Hoddy. A good maggot-factory don't just breed ordinary maggots, you know. Every fisherman's got his own tastes. Maggots are commonest, but also there's lug worms. Some fishermen won't have nothing but lug worms. And of course there's coloured maggots. Ordinary maggots are white, but you get them all sorts of different colours by feeding them special foods, see. Red ones and green ones and black ones and you can even get blue ones if you know what to feed them. The most difficult thing of all in a maggot-factory is a blue maggot, Mr Hoddy."

Claud stopped to catch his breath. He was having a vision now--the same vision that accompanied all his dreams of wealth--of an immense factory building with tall chimneys and hundreds of happy workers streaming in through the wide wrought-iron gates and Claud himself sitting in his luxurious office directing operations with a calm and splendid assurance.

"There's people with brains studying these things this very minute," he went on. "So you got to jump in quick unless you want to get left out in the cold. That's the secret of big business, jumping in quick before all the others, Mr Hoddy."

Glance, Ada, and the father sat absolutely still looking straight ahead. None of them moved or spoke. Only Claud rushed on.

"Just so long as you make sure your maggots is alive when you post 'em. They've got to be wiggling, see. Maggots is no good unless they're wiggling. And when we really get going, when we've built up a little capital, then we 'll put up some glasshouses."

Another pause, and Claud stroked his chin. "Now I expect you're all wondering why a person should want glasshouses in a maggotfactory. Well--I'll tell you. It's for the flies in the winter, see. Most important to take care of your flies in the winter."

"I think that's enough, thank you, Cabbage," Mr Hoddy said suddenly.

Claud looked up and for the first time he saw the expression on the man's face. It stopped him cold.

"I don't want to hear any more about it," Mr Hoddy said.

"All I'm trying to do, Mr Hoddy," Claud cried, "is give your little girl everything she can possibly desire. That's all I'm thinking of night and day, Mr Hoddy."

"Then all I hope is you'll be able to do it without the help of maggots."

"Dad!" Glance cried, alarmed. "I simply won't have you talking to Claud like that."

"I'll talk to him how I wish, thank you Miss."

"I think it's time I was getting along," Claud said. "Good night."

MR FEASEY

We were both up early when the big day came.

I wandered into the kitchen for a shave, but Claud got dressed right away and went outside to arrange about the straw. The kitchen was a front room and through the window I could see the sun just coming up behind the line of trees on top of the ridge the other side of the valley.

Each time Claud came past the window with an armload of straw I noticed over the rim of the mirror the intent, breathless expression on his face, the great round bullet-head thrusting forward and the forehead wrinkled into deep corrugations right up to the hairline. I'd only seen this look on him once before and that was the evening he'd asked Glance to marry him. Today he was so excited he even walked funny, treading softly as though the concrete

around the filling-station were a shade too hot for the soles of his feet; and he kept packing more and more straw into the back of the van to make it comfortable for Jackie.

Then he came into the kitchen to get breakfast, and I watched him put the pot of soup on the stove and begin stirring it. He had a long metal spoon and he kept on stirring and stirring all the time it was coming to the boil, and about every half minute he leaned forward and stuck his nose into that sickly-sweet steam of cooking horseflesh. Then he started putting extras into it three peeled onions, a few young carrots, a cupful of stinging-nettle tops, a teaspoon of Valentines Meat Juice, twelve drops of cod-liver oil--and everything he touched was handled very gently with the ends of his big fat fingers as though it might have been a little fragment of Venetian glass. He took some minced horsemeat from the icebox, measured one handful into Jackie's bowl, three into the other, and when the soup was ready he shared it out between the two, pouring it over the meat.

It was the same ceremony I'd seen performed each morning for the past five months, but never with such intense and breathless concentration as this. There was no talk, not even a glance my way, and when he turned and went out again to fetch the dogs, even the back of his neck and the shoulders seemed to be whispering, 'Oh, Jesus, don't let anything go wrong, and especially don't let me do anything wrong today.'

I heard him talking softly to the dogs in the pen as he put the leashes on them, and when he brought them around into the kitchen, they came in prancing and pulling to get at the breakfast, treading up and down with their front feet and waving their enormous tails from side to side, like whips.

"All right," Claud said, speaking at last. "Which is it?"

Most mornings he'd offer to bet me a pack of cigarettes, but there were bigger things at stake today and I knew all he wanted for the moment was a little extra reassurance.

He watched me as I walked once around the two beautiful, identical, tall, velvety-black dogs, and he moved aside, holding the leashes at arms' length to give me a better view.

"Jackie!" I said, trying the old trick that never worked. "Hey, Jackie!"

Two identical heads with identical expressions flicked around to look at me, four bright, identical, deep-yellow eyes stared into mine. There'd been a time when I fancied the eyes of one were slightly darker yellow than those of the other. There'd also been a time when I thought I could recognize Jackie because of a deeper brisket and a shade more muscle on the hindquarters. But it wasn't so.

"Come on," Claud said. He was hoping that today of all days I would make a bad guess.

"This one," I said. "This is Jackie."

"Which?"

"This one on the left."

"There!" he cried, his whole face suddenly beaming. "You're wrong again!"

"I don't think I'm wrong."

"You're about as wrong as you could possibly be. And now listen, Gordon, and I'll tell you something. All these last weeks, every morning while you've been trying to pick him out--you know what?"

"What?"

"I've been keeping count. And the result is you haven't been right even one-half the time! You'd have done better tossing a coin!"

What he meant was that if I (who saw them every day and side by side) couldn't do it, why the hell should we be frightened of Mr Feasey? Claud knew Mr Feasey was famous for spotting ringers, but he knew also that it could be very difficult to tell the difference between two dogs when there wasn't any.

He put the bowls of food on the floor, giving Jackie the one with the least meat because he was running today. When he stood back to watch them eat, the shadow of deep concern was back again on his face and the large pale eyes were staring at Jackie with the same rapt and melting look of love that at up till recently had been reserved only for Glance.

"You see, Gordon," he said. "It's just what I've always told you. For the last hundred years there's been all manner of ringers, some good and some bad, but in the whole history of dogracing there's never been a ringer like this."

"I hope you're right," I said, and my mind began travelling back to that freezing afternoon just before Christmas, four months ago, when Claud had asked to borrow the van and had driven away in the direction of Aylesbury without saying where he was going. I had assumed he was off to see Glance, but late in the afternoon he had returned bringing with him this dog he said he'd bought off a man for thirty-five shillings.

"Is he fast?" I had said. We were standing out by the pumps and Claud was holding the dog on a leash and looking at him, and a few snowflakes were falling and settling on the dog's back. The motor of the van was still running.

"Fast!" Claud had said. "He's just about the slowest dog you ever saw in your whole life!"

"Then what you buy him for?"

"Well," he had said, the big bovine face secret and cunning, "it occurred to me that maybe he might possibly look a little bit like Jackie. What do you think?"

"I suppose he does a bit, now you come to mention it."

He had handed me the leash and I had taken the new dog inside to dry him off while Claud had gone round to the pen to fetch his beloved. And when he returned and we put the two of them together for the first time, I can remember him stepping back and saying, "Oh, Jesus!" and standing dead still in front of them like he was seeing a phantom. Then he became very quick and quiet. He got down on his knees and began comparing them carefully point by point, and it was almost like the room was getting warmer and warmer the way I could feel his excitement growing every second through this long silent examination in which even the toenails and the dewclaws, eighteen on each dog, were matched alongside one another for colour.

"Look," he said at last, standing up. "Walk them up and down the room a few times, will you?" And then he had stayed there for quite five or six minutes leaning against the stove with his eyes half closed and his head on one side, watching them and frowning and chewing his lips. After that, as though he didn't believe what he had seen the first time, he had gone down again on his knees to recheck everything once more; but suddenly, in the middle of it, he had jumped up and looked at me, his face fixed and tense, with a curious whiteness around the nostrils and the eyes. "All right," he had said, a little tremor in his voice. 'You know what?

We're home. We're rich."

And then the secret conferences between us in the kitchen, the detailed planning, the selection of the most suitable track, and finally every other Saturday, eight times in all, locking up my filling-station (losing a whole afternoon's custom) and driving the ringer all the way up to Oxford to a scruffy little track out in the fields near Headington where the big money was played but which was actually nothing except a line of old posts and cord to mark the course, an upturned bicycle for pulling the dummy hare, and at the far end, in the distance, six traps and the starter. We had driven this ringer up there eight times over a period of sixteen weeks and entered him with Mr Feasey and stood around on the edge of the crowd in freezing raining cold, waiting for his name to go up on the blackboard in chalk. The Black Panther we called him. And when his time came, Claud would always lead him down to the traps and I would stand at the finish to catch him and keep him clear of the fighters, the gipsy dogs that the gipsies so often slipped in specially to tear another one to pieces at the end of a race.

But you know, there was something rather sad about taking this dog all the way up there so many times and letting him run and watching him and hoping and praying that whatever happened he would always come last. Of course the praying wasn't necessary and we never really had a moment's worry because the old fellow simply couldn't gallop and that's all there was to it. He ran exactly like a crab. The only time he didn't come last was when a big fawn dog by the name of Amber Flash put his boot in a hole and brok

e a hock and finished on three legs. But even then ours only just beat him . So this way we got him right down to bottom grade with the scrubbers, and the last time we were there all the bookies were laying him twenty or thirty to one and calling his name and begging people to back him.

Now at last, on this sunny April day, it was Jackie's turn to go instead. Claud said we mustn't run the ringer any more or Mr Feasey might begin to get tired of him and throw him out altogether, he was so slow. Claud said this was the exact psychological time to have it off, and that Jackie would win it anything between thirty and fifty lengths.

He had raised Jackie from a pup and the dog was only fifteen months now, but he was a good fast runner. He'd never raced yet; but we knew he was fast from clocking him round the little private schooling track at Uxbridge where Claud had taken him every Sunday since he was seven months old--except once when he was having some inoculations, Claud said he probably wasn't fast enough to win top grade at Mr Feasey's, but where we'd got him now, in bottom grade with the scrubbers, he could fall over and get up again and still win it twenty well, anyway ten or fifteen lengths, Claud said.

So all I had to do this morning was go to the bank in the village and draw out fifty pounds for myself and fifty for Claud which I would lend him as an advance against wages, and then at twelve o'clock lock up the filling station and hang the notice on one of the pumps saying GONE FOR THE DAY. Claud would shut the ringer in the pen at the back and put Jackie in the van and off we'd go. I won't say I was as excited as Claud, but there again, I didn't have all sorts of important things depending on it either, like buying a house and being able to get married. Nor was I almost born in a kennel with greyhounds like he was, walking about thinking of absolutely nothing else all day except perhaps Glance in the evenings. Personally, I had my own career as a filling station owner to keep me busy, not to mention second-hand cars, but if Claud wanted to fool around with dogs that was all right with me, especially a thing like today--if it came off. As a matter of fact, I don't mind admitting that every time I thought about the money we were putting on and the money we might win, my stomach gave a little lurch.

The dogs had finished their breakfast now and Claud took them out for a short walk across the field opposite while I got dressed and fried the eggs.

Afterwards, I went to the bank and drew out the money (all in ones), and the rest of the morning seemed to go very quickly serving customers.

At twelve sharp I locked up and hung the notice on the pump. Claud came around from the back leading Jackie and carrying a large suitcase made of reddish-brown cardboard.

"Suitcase?"

"For the money," Claud answered. "You said yourself no man can carry two thousand pounds in his pockets."

It was a lovely yellow spring day with the buds bursting all along the hedges and the sun shining through the new pale green leaves on the big beech tree across the road. Jackie looked wonderful, with two big hard muscles the size of melons bulging on his hindquarters, his coat glistening like black velvet. While Claud was putting the suitcase in the van, the dog did a little prancing jig on his toes to show how fit he was, then he looked up at me and grinned, just like he knew he was off to the races to win two thousand pounds and a heap of glory. This Jackie had the widest most human-smiling grin I ever saw. Not only did he lift his upper lip, but he actually stretched the corners of his mouth so you could see every tooth in his head except perhaps one or two of the molars right at the back; and every time I saw him do it I found myself waiting to hear him start laughing out loud as well.

We got in the van and off we went. I was doing the driving. Claud was beside me and Jackie was standing up on the straw in the rear looking over our shoulders through the windshield. Claud kept turning round and trying to make him lie down so he wouldn't get thrown whenever we went round the sharp corners, but the dog was too excited to do anything except grin back at him and wave his enormous tail.

"You got the money, Gordon?" Claud was chain-smoking cigarettes and quite unable to sit still.

"Yes."

"Mine as well?"

"I got a hundred and five altogether. Five for the winder like you said, so he won't stop the hare and make it a no-race."

"Good," Claud said, rubbing his hands together hard as though he were freezing cold. "Good, good, good."

We drove through the little narrow High Street of Great Missenden and caught a glimpse of old Rummins going into The Nag's Head for his morning pint, then outside the village we turned left and climbed over the ridge of the Chilterns towards Princes Risborough, and from there it would only be twenty-odd miles to Oxford.

And now a silence and a kind of tension began to come over us both. We sat very quiet, not speaking at all, each nursing his own fears and excitements, containing his anxiety. And Claud kept smoking his cigarettes and throwing them half finished out the window. Usually, on these trips, he talked his head off all the way there and back, all the things he'd done with dogs in his life, the jobs he'd pulled, the places he'd been, the money he'd won; and all the things other people had done with dogs, the thievery, the cruelty, the unbelievable trickery and cunning of owners at the flapping tracks. But today I don't think he was trusting himself to speak very much. At this point, for that matter, nor was I. I was sitting there watching the road and trying to keep my mind off the immediate future by thinking back on all that s

tuff Claud had told me about this curious greyhound racing racket.

I swear there wasn't a man alive who knew more about it than Claud did, and ever since we'd got the ringer and decided to pull this job, he'd taken it upon himself to give me an education in the business. By now, in theory at any rate, I suppose I knew nearly as much as him.

It had started during the very first strategy conference we'd had in the kitchen. I can remember it was the day after the ringer arrived and we were sitting there watching for customers through the window, and Claud was explaining to me all about what we'd have to do, and I was trying to follow him as best I could until finally there came one question I had to ask.

"What I don't see," I had said, "is why you use the ringer at all. Wouldn't it be safer if we use Jackie all the time and simply stop him the first half dozen races so he comes last? Then when we're good and ready, we can let him go. Same result in the end, wouldn't it be, if we do it right? And no danger of being caught."

Well, as I say, that did it. Claud looked up at me quickly and he said, "Hey! None of that! I'd just like you to know, 'stopping's' something I never do. What's come over you, Gordon?" He seemed genuinely pained and shocked by what I had said.

"I don't see anything wrong with it."

"Now, listen to me, Gordon. Stopping a good dog breaks his heart. A good dog knows he's fast, and seeing all the others out there in front and not being able to catch them--it breaks his heart, I tell you. And what's more, you wouldn't be making suggestions like that if you knew some of the tricks them fellers do to stop their dogs at the flapping tracks."

"Such as what, for example?" I had asked.

"Such as anything in the world almost, so long as it makes the dog go slower. And it takes a lot of stopping, a good greyhound does. Full of guts and so mad keen you can't even let them watch a race, they'll tear the leash right out of your hand rearing to go. Many's the time I've seen one with a broken leg insisting on finishing the race."

He had paused then, looking at me thoughtfully with those large pale eyes, serious as hell and obviously thinking deep. "Maybe," he had said, "if we're going to do this job properly I'd better tell you a thing or two so's you'll know what we're up against."

"Go ahead and tell me," I had said. "I'd like to know."

For a moment he stared in silence out the window. "The main thing you got to remember," he had said darkly, "is that all these fellers going to the flapping tracks with dogs--they're artful. They're more artful than you could possibly imagine." Again he paused, marshalling his thoughts.

"Now take for example the different ways of stopping a dog. The first, the commonest, is strapping."

"Strapping?"

"Yes. Strapping 'em up. That's commonest. Pulling the muzzle-strap tight around their necks so they can't hardly breathe, see. A clever man knows just which hole on the strap to use and just how many lengths it'll take off his dog in a race. Usually a couple of notches is good for five or six lengths. Do it up real tight and he'll come last. I've known plenty of dogs collapse and die from being strapped up tight on a hot day. Strangled, absolutely strangled, and a very nasty thing it was too. Then again, some of 'em just tie two of the toes together with black cotton. Dog never runs well like that. Unbalances him."

"That doesn't sound too bad."

"Then there's others that put a piece of fresh-chewed gum up under their tails, right up close where the tail joins the body. And there's nothing funny about that," he had said, indignant. "The tail of a running dog goes up and down ever so slightly and the gum on the tail keeps sticking to the hairs on the backside, just where it's tenderest. No dog likes that, you know. Then there's sleeping pills. That's used a lot nowadays. They do it by weight, exactly like a doctor, and they measure the powder according to whether they want to slow him up five or ten or fifteen lengths. Those are just a few of the ordinary ways," he had said. "Actually they're nothing. Absolutely nothing, compared with some of the other things that's done to hold a dog back in a race, especially by the gipsies. There's things the gipsies do that are almost too disgusting to mention, such as when they're just putting the dog in the trap, things you wouldn't hardly do to your worst enemies."

And when he had told me about those which were, indeed, terrible things because they had to do with physical injury, quickly, painfully inflicted--then he had gone on, to tell me what they did when they wanted the dog to win. "There's just as terrible things done to make 'em go fast as to make 'em go slow," he had said softly, his face veiled and secret. "And perhaps the commonest of all is wintergreen. Whenever you see a dog going around with no hair on his back or little bald patches all over him that's wintergreen. Just before the race they rub it hard into the skin. Sometimes it's Sloan's Liniment, but mostly it's wintergreen. Stings terrible. Stings so bad that all the old dog wants to do is run, run, run as fast as he possibly can to get away from the pain."

"Then there's special drugs they give with the needle. Mind you, that's the modern method and most of the spivs at the track are too ignorant to use it. It's the fellers coming down from London in the big cars with stadium dogs they've borrowed for the day by bribing the trainer--they're the ones who use the needle."

I could remember him sitting there at the kitchen table with a cigarette dangling from his mouth and dropping his eyelids to keep out the smoke and

d looking at me through his wrinkled, nearly closed eyes, and saying, "What you've got to remember, Gordon, is this. There's nothing they won't do to make a dog win if they want him to. On the other hand, no dog can run faster than he's built, no matter what they do to him. So if we can get Jackie down into bottom grade, then we're home. No dog in bottom grade can get near him, not even with wintergreen and needles. Not even with ginger."

"Ginger?"

"Certainly. That's a common one, ginger is. What they do, they take a piece of raw ginger about the size of a walnut, and about five minutes before the off they slip it into the dog."

"You mean in his mouth? He eats it?"

"No," he had said. "Not in his mouth."

And so it had gone on. During each of the eight long trips we had subsequently made to the track with the ringer I had heard more and more about this charming sport--more, especially, about the methods of stopping them and making them go (even the names of the drugs and the quantities to use). I heard about 'The rat treatment' (for non-chasers, to make them chase the dummy hare), where a rat is placed in a can which is then tied around the dog's neck. There's a small hole in the lid of the can just large enough for the rat to poke its head out and nip the dog. But the dog can't get at the rat, and so naturally he goes half crazy running around and being bitten in the neck, and the more he shakes the can the more the rat bites him. Finally, someone releases the rat, and the dog, who up to then was a nice docile tail-wagging animal who wouldn't hurt a mouse, pounces on it in a rage and tears it to pieces. Do this a few times, Claud had said--"mind you, I don't hold with it myself"--and the dog becomes a real killer who will chase anything, even the dummy hare.

We were over the Chilterns now and running down out of the beechwoods into the flat elmand oak-tree country south of Oxford. Claud sat quietly beside me, nursing his nervousness and smoking cigarettes, and every two or three minutes he would turn round to see if Jackie was all right. The dog was at last lying down, and each time Claud turned round, he whispered something to him softly, and the dog acknowledged his words with a faint movement of the tail that made the straw rustle.

Soon we would be coming into Thame, the broad High Street where they penned the pigs and cows and sheep on market day, and where the Fair came once a year with the swings and roundabouts and bumping cars and gipsy caravans right there in the street in the middle of the town. Claud was born in Thame, and we'd never driven through it yet without him mentioning the fact.

"Well," he said as the first houses came into sight, "here's Thame. I was born and bred in Thame, you know, Gordon."

"You told me."

"Lots of funny things we used to do around here when we was nippers," he said, slightly nostalgic.

"I'm sure."

He paused, and I think more to relieve the tension building up inside him than anything else, he began talking about the years of his youth.

"There was a boy next door," he said. "Gilbert Gomm his name was. Little sharp ferrety face and one leg a bit shorter'n the other. Shocking things him and me used to do together. You know one thing we done, Gordon?"

"What?"

"We'd go into the kitchen Saturday nights when mum and dad were at the pub, and we'd disconnect the pipe from the gas-ring and bubble the gas into a milk bottle full of water. Then we'd sit down and drink it out of teacups."

"Was that so good?"

"Good! It was absolutely disgusting! But we'd put lashings of sugar in and then it didn't taste so bad."

"Why did you drink it?"

Claud turned and looked at me, incredulous. "You mean you never drunk 'Snakes Water'!"

"Can't say I have."

"I thought everyone done that when they was kids! It intoxicates you, just like wine only worse, depending on how long you let the gas bubble through. We used to get reeling drunk together there in the kitchen Saturday nights and it was marvellous. Until one night Dad comes home early and catches us. I'll never forget that night as long as I live. There was me holding the milk bottle, and the gas bubbling through it lovely, and Gilbert kneeling on the floor ready to turn off the tap the moment I give the word, and in walks Dad."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, Christ, Gordon, that was terrible. He didn't say one word, but he stands there by the door and he starts feeling for his belt, undoing the buckle very slow and pulling the belt slow out of his trousers, looking at me all the time. Great big feller he was, with great big hands like coal hammers and a black moustache and them little purple veins running all over his cheeks. Then he comes over quick and grabs me by the coat and lets me have it, hard as he can, using the end with the buckle on it and honest to God, Gordon, I thought he was going to kill me. But in the end he stops and then he puts on the belt again, slow and careful, buckling it up and tuckling in the flap and belching with the beer he'd drunk. And then he walks out again back to the pub, still without saying a word. Worst hiding I ever had in my life."

"How old were you then?"

"Round about eight, I should think," Claud said.

As we drew closer to Oxford, he became silent again. He kept twisting his neck to see if Jackie was all right, to touch him, to stroke his head, and once he turned around and knelt on the seat to gather more straw around the dog, murmuring something about a draught. We drove around the fringe of Oxford and into a network of narrow open country roads, and after a while we turned into a small bumpy lane and along this we began to overtake a thin stream of men and women all walking and cycling in the same direction. Some of the men were leading greyhounds. There was a large saloon car in front of us and through the rear window we could see a dog sitting on the back seat between two men.

"They come from all over," Claud said darkly. "That one there's probably come up special from London. Probably slipped him out from one of the big stadium kennels just for the afternoon.

That could be a Derby dog probably for all we know."

"Hope he's not running against Jackie."

"Don't worry," Claud said. "All new dogs automatically go in top grade. That's one rule Mr Feasey's very particular about."

There was an open gate leading into a field, and Mr Feasey's wife came forward to take our admission money before we drove in.

"He'd have her winding the bloody pedals too if she had the strength; Claud said. "Old Feasey don't employ more people than he has to."

I drove across the field and parked at the end of a line of cars along the top hedge. We both got out and Claud went quickly round the back to fetch Jackie. I stood beside the car, waiting. It was a very large field with a steepish slope on it and we were at the top of the slope, looking down. In the distance I could see the six starting traps and the wooden posts marking the track which ran along the bottom of the field and turned sharp at right angles and came on up the hill towards the crowd, to the finish. Thirty yards beyond the finishing line stood the upturned bicycle for driving the hare. Because it is portable, this is the standard machine for hare-driving used at all flapping tracks. It comprises a flimsy wooden platform about eight feet high, supported on four poles knocked into the ground. On top of the platform there is fixed, upside down with wheels in the air, an ordinary old bicycle. The rear wheel is to the front, facing down the track, and from it the tyre has been removed, leaving a concave metal rim. One end of the cord that pulls the hare is attached to this rim, and the winder (or hare driver), by straddling the bicycle at the back and turning the pedals with his hands, revolves the wheel and winds in the cord around the rim. This pulls the dummy hare towards him at any speed he likes up to forty miles an hour. After each race someone takes the dummy hare (with cord attached) all the way down to the starting traps again, thus unwinding the cord on the wheel, ready for a

fresh start. From his high platform, the winder can watch the race and regulate the speed of the hare to keep it just ahead of the leading dog. He can also stop the hare any time he wants to make it a 'no race' (if the wrong dog looks like winning) by suddenly turning the pedals backwards and getting the cord tangled up in the hub of the wheel. The other way of doing it is to slow down the hare suddenly, for perhaps one second, and that makes the lead dog automatically check a little so that the others catch up with him. He is an important

I could see Mr Feasey's winder already standing atop his platform, a powerful-looking man in a blue sweater, leaning on the bicycle and looking down at the crowd through the smoke of his cigarette.

There is a curious law in England which permits race meetings of this kind to be held only seven times a year over one piece of ground. That is why all Mr Feasey's equipment was movable, and after the seventh meeting he would simply transfer to the next field. The law didn't bother him at all.

There was already a good crowd and the bookmarkers were erecting their stands in a line over to the right. Claud had Jackie out of the van now and was leading him over to a group of people clustered around a small stocky man dressed in riding-breeches Mr Feasey himself. Each person in the group had a dog on a leash and Mr Feasey kept writing names in a notebook that he held folded in his left hand. I sauntered over to watch.

"Which you got there?" Mr Feasey said, pencil poised above the notebook

"Midnight," a man said who was holding a black dog.

Mr Feasey stepped back a pace and looked most carefully at the dog.

"Midnight. Right. I got him down."

"Jane," the next man said.

"Let me look. Jane... Jane... yes, all right."

"Soldier." This dog was led by a tall man with long teeth who wore a dark-blue, doublebreasted lounge suit, shiny with wear, and when he said 'Soldier' he began slowly to scratch the seat of his trousers with the hand that wasn't holding the leash.

Mr Feasey bent down to examine the dog. The other man looked up at the sky.

"Take him away," Mr Feasey said.

The man looked down quick and stopped scratching.

"Go on, take him away."

"Listen, Mr Feasey," the man said, lisping slightly through his long teeth.

"Now don't talk so bloody silly, please."

"Go on and beat it, Larry, and stop wasting my time. You know as well as I do the Soldier's got two white toes on his off fore."

"Now look, Mr Feasey," the man said. "You ain't even seen Soldier for six

months at least."

"Come on now, Larry, and beat it. I haven't got time arguing with you." Mr Feasey didn't appear the least angry. "Next," he said.

I saw Claud step forward leading Jackie. The large bovine face was fixed and wooden, the eyes staring at something about a yard above Mr Feasey's head, and he was holding the leash so tight his knuckles were like a row of little white onions. I knew just how he was feeling. I felt the same way myself at that moment, and it was even worse when Mr Feasey suddenly started laughing.

"Hey!" he cried. "Here's the Black Panther. Here's the champion."

"That's right, Mr Feasey," Claud said.

"Well, I'll tell you," Mr Feasey said, still grinning. "You can take him right back home where he come from. I don't want him."

"But look here, Mr Feasey..

"Six or eight times at least I've run him for you now and that's enough. Look--why don't you shoot him and have done with it?"

"Now, listen, Mr Feasey, please. Just once more and I'll never ask you again."

"Not even once! I got more dogs than I can handle here today. There's no room for crabs like that." I thought Claud was going to cry.

"Now honest, Mr Feasey," he said. "I been up at six every morning this past two weeks giving him roadwork and massage and buying him beefsteaks, and believe me he's a different dog absolutely than what he was last time he run."

The words 'different dog' caused Mr Feasey to jump like he'd been pricked with a hatpin. "What's that!" he cried. "Different dog!"

I'll say this for Claud, he kept his head. "See here, Mr Feasey," he said.

"I'll thank you not to go implying things to me. You know very well I didn't mean that."

"All right, all right. But just the same, you can take him away. There's no sense running dogs as slow as him. Take him home now, will you please, and don't hold up the whole meeting."

I was watching Claud. Claud was watching Mr Feasey. Mr Feasey was looking round for the next dog to enter up. Under his brown tweedy jacket he wore a yellow pullover, and this streak of yellow on his breast and his thin gaunter legs and the way he jerked his head from side to side made him seem like some sort of a little perky bird--a goldfinch, perhaps.

Claud took a step forward. His face was beginning to purple slightly with the outrage of it all and I could see his Adam's apple moving up and down as he swallowed.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mr Feasey. I'm so absolutely sure this dog's improved I'll bet you a quid he don't finish last. There you are."

Mr Feasey turned slowly around and looked at Claud. "You crackers?" he asked. "I'll bet you a quid, there you are, just to prove what I'm saying."

It was a dangerous move, certain to cause suspicion, but Claud knew it was the only thing left to do. There was silence while Mr Feasey bent down and examined the dog. I could see the way his eyes were moving slowly over the animal's whole body, part by part. There was something to admire in the man's thoroughness, and in his memory; something to fear also in this self-confident little rogue who held in his head the shape and colour and markings of perhaps several hundred different but very similar dogs. He never needed more than one little clue--a small scar, a splay toe, a trifle in the hocks, a less pronounced wheelback, a slightly darker brindle--Mr Feasey always remembered.

So I watched him now as he bent down over Jackie. His face was pink and fleshy, the mouth small and tight as though it couldn't stretch enough to make a smile, and the eyes were like two little cameras focused sharply on the dog.

"Well," he said, straightening up. "It's the same dog, anyway."

"I should hope so too!" Claud cried. "Just what sort of a fellow you think I am, Mr Feasey?"

"I think you're crackers, that's what I think. But it's a nice easy way to make a quid. I suppose you forgot how Amber Flash nearly beat him on three legs last meeting?"

"This one wasn't fit then," Claud said. "He hadn't had beefsteak and massage and roadwork like I've been giving him lately. But look Mr Feasey, you're not to go sticking him in top grade just to win the bet. This is a bottom grade dog, Mr Feasey. You know that."

Mr Feasey laughed. The small button mouth opened into a tiny circle and he laughed and looked at the crowd who laughed with him. "Listen," he said, laying a hairy hand on Claud's shoulder. "I know my dogs. I don't have to do any fiddling around to win this quid. He goes in bottom."

"Right," Claud said. "That's a bet." He walked away with Jackie and I joined him.

"Jesus, Gordon, that was a near one!"

"Shook me."

"But we're in now," Claud said. He had that breathless look on his face again and he was walking about quick and funny, like the ground was burning his feet.

People were still coming through the gate into the field and there were easily three hundred of them now. Now a very nice crowd. Sharpnosed men and women with dirty faces and bad teeth and quick shifty eyes. The dregs of the big town. Oozing out like sewage from a cracked pipe and trickling along the road through the gate and making a smelly little pond of sewage at the

the top end of the field. They were all there, all the spivs, and the gipsies and the touts and the dregs and the sewage and the scraping and the scum from the cracked drainpipes of the big town. Some with dogs, some without. Dogs led about on pieces of string, miserable dogs with hanging heads, thin mangy dogs with sores on their quarters (from sleeping on board), sad old dogs with grey muzzles, doped dogs, dogs stuffed with porridge to stop them winning, dogs walking stiff-legged--one especially, a white one. "Claud, why is that white one walking so stiff-legged?"

"Which one?"

"That one over there."

"Ah. Yes, I see. Very probably because he's been hung."

"Hung?"

"Yes, hung. Suspended in a harness for twenty-four hours with his legs dangling."

"Good God, but why?"

"To make him run slow, of course. Some people don't hold with dope or stuffing or strapping up. So they hang 'em."

"I see."

"Either that," Claud said, "or they sandpaper them. Rub their pads with rough sandpaper and take the skin off so it hurts when they run."

"Yes, I see."

And then the fitter, brighter-looking dogs, the better-fed ones who get horsemeat every day, not pig-swill or rusk and cabbage water, their coats shinier, their tails moving, pulling at their leads, undoped, unstuffed, awaiting perhaps a more unpleasant fate, the muzzle-strap to be tightened an extra four notches. But make sure he can breathe now, Jock. Don't choke him completely. Don't let's have him collapse in the middle of the race. Just-so he wheezes a bit, see. Go on tightening it up an extra notch at a time until you can hear him wheezing. You'll see his mouth open and he'll start breathing heavy. Then it's just right, but not if his eyeballs is bulging. Watch out for that, will you? Okay?

Okay.

"Let's get away from the crowd, Gordon. It don't do Jackie no good getting excited by all these other dogs."

We walked up the slope to where the cars were parked, then back and forth in front of the line of cars, keeping the dog on the move. Inside some of the cars I could see men sitting with their dogs, and the men scowled at us through the windows as we went by.

"Watch out now, Gordon. We don't want any trouble."

"No, all right."

These were the best dogs of all, the secret ones kept in the cars and taken out quick just to be entered up (under some invented name) and put back again

ain quick and held there till the last minute, then straight down to the trap s and back again into the cars after the race so no nosy bastard gets too close a look. The trainer at the big stadium said so. All right, he said. You can have him, but for Christ's sake don't let anybody recognize him. There's thousands of people know this dog, so you've got to be careful, see. And it'll cost you fifty pound.

Very fast dogs these, but it doesn't much matter how fast they are they probably get the needle anyway, just to make sure. One and a half c.c.s. of ether, subcutaneous, done in the car, injected very slow. That'll put ten lengths on any dog. Or sometimes it's caffeine in oil, or camphor. That makes them go too. The men in the big cars know all about that. And some of them know about whisky. But that's intravenous. Not so easy when it's intravenous. Might miss the vein. All you got to do is miss the vein and it don't work and where are you then? So it's ether, or it's caffeine, or it's camphor. Don't give her too much of that stuff now, Jock What does she weigh? Fifty-eight pounds. All right then, you know what the man told us. Wait a minute now. I got it written down on a piece of paper. Here it is. Point I of a c.c. per 10 pounds bodyweight equals 5 lengths over 300 yards. Wait a minute now while I work it out. Oh Christ, you better guess it. Just guess it, Jock. It'll be all right you'll find. Shouldn't be any trouble anyway because I picked the others in the race myself Cost me a tenner to old Feasey. A bloody tenner I gave him, my dear Mr Feasey, I says, that's for your birthday and because I love you.

Thank you ever so much, Mr Feasey says. Thank you, my good and trusted friend.

And for stopping them, for the men in the big cars, it's chlorbutal. That's beauty, chlorbutal, because you can give it the night before, especially to someone else's dog. Or Pethidine. Pethidine and Hyoscine mixed, whatever that may be.

"Lot of fine old English sporting gentry here," Claud said.

"Certainly are."

"Watch your pockets, Gordon. You got that money hidden away?"

We walked around the back of the line of cars--between the cars and the hedge--and I saw Jackie stiffen and begin to pull forward on the leash, advancing with a stiff crouching tread. About thirty yards away there were two men. One was holding a large fawn greyhound, the dog stiff and tense like Jackie. The other was holding a sack in his hands.

"Watch," Claud whispered, "they're giving him a kill."

Out of the sack on to the grass tumbled a small white rabbit, fluffy white, young, tame. It righted itself and sat still, crouching in the hunched up way rabbits crouch, its nose close to the ground. A frightened rabbit. Out of the sack so suddenly on to the grass with such a bump. Into the bright l

ight. The dog was going mad with excitement, now, jumping up against the leash, pawing the ground, throwing himself forward, whining. The rabbit saw the dog. It drew in its head and stayed still, paralysed with fear. The man transferred his hold to the dog's collar, and the dog twisted and jumped and tried to get free. The other man pushed the rabbit with his foot but it was too terrified to move. He pushed it again, flicking it forward with his toe like a football, and the rabbit rolled over several times, righted itself and began to hop over the grass away from the dog. The other man released the dog which pounced with one huge pounce upon the rabbit, and then came the squeals, not very loud but shrill and anguished and lasting rather a long time.

"There you are," Claud said. "That's a kill."

"Not sure I like it very much."

"I told you before, Gordon. Most of 'em does it. Keens the dog up before a race."

"I still don't like it."

"Nor me. But they all do it. Even in the big stadiums the trainers do it. Proper barbarity I call it."

We strolled away and below us on the slope of the hill the crowd was thickening and the bookies' stands with the names written on them in red and gold and blue were all erected now in a long line back of the crowd, each bookie already stationed on an upturned box beside his stand, a pack of numbered cards in one hand, a piece of chalk in the other, his clerk behind him with book and pencil. Then we saw Mr Feasey walking over to a blackboard that was nailed to a post stuck in the ground.

"He's chalking up the first race," Claud said. "Come on, quick!"

We walked rapidly down the hill and joined the crowd. Mr Feasey was writing the runners on the blackboard, copying names from his softcovered notebook, and a little hush of suspense fell upon the crowd as they watched.

1. Sally
2. Three Quid
3. Snailbox Lady
4. Black Panther

5. Whisky

6. Rockit

"He's in it!" Claud whispered. "First race! Trap four! Now, listen, Gordon! Give me a flyer quick to show the winder." Claud could hardly speak from excitement. That patch of whiteness had returned around his nose and eyes, and when I handed him a five pound note, his whole arm was shaking as he took it. The man who was going to wind the bicycle pedals was still standing on top of the wooden platform in his blue jersey, smoking. Claud went over and stood below him, looking up.

"See this flyer," he said, talking softly, holding it folded small in the palm of his hand.

The man glanced at it without moving his head.

"Just so long as you wind her true this race, see. No stopping and no slowing down and run her fast. Right?"

The man didn't move but there was a slight, almost imperceptible lifting of the eyebrows. Claud turned away.

"Now, look, Gordon. Get the money on gradual, all in little bits like I told you. Just keep going down the line putting on little bits so you don't kill the price, see. And I'll be walking Jackie down very slow, as slow as I dare, to give you plenty of time. Right?"

"Right."

"And don't forget to be standing ready to catch him at the end of the race. Get him clear away from all them others when they start fighting for the hare. Grab a hold of him tight and don't let go till I come running up with the collar and lead. That Whisky's a gipsy dog and he'll tear the leg off anything as gets in his way."

"Right," I said. "Here we go."

I saw Claud lead Jackie over to the finishing post and collect a yellow jacket with 4 written on it large. Also a muzzle. The other five runners were there too, the owners fussing around them, putting on their numbered jackets, adjusting their muzzles. Mr Feasey was officiating, hopping about in his tight riding-breeches like an anxious perky bird, and once I saw him say something to Claud and laugh. Claud ignored him. Soon they would all start to lead the dogs down the track, the long walk down the hill and across to the far corner of the field to the starting-traps. It would take them ten minutes to walk it. I've got at least ten minutes, I told myself, and then I began to push my way through the crowd standing six or seven deep in front of the line of bookies.

"Even money Whisky! Even money Whisky! Five to two Sally! Even money Whisky! Four to one Snailbox! Come on now! Hurry up, hurry up. Which is it?"

On every board all down the line the Black Panther was chalked up at twenty-five to one. I edged forward to the nearest book.

"Three pounds Black Panther," I said, holding out the money.

The man on the box had an inflamed magenta face and traces of some white substance around the corners of his mouth. He snatched the money and dropped it in his satchel. "Seventyfive pounds to three Black Panther," he said. "Number forty-two." He handed me a ticket and his clerk recorded the bet.

I stepped back and wrote rapidly on the back of the ticket 75 to 3, then slipped it into the inside pocket of my jacket with the money.

So long as I continued to spread the cash out thin like this, it ought to be all right. And anyway, on Claud's instructions, I'd made a point of betting a few pounds on the ringer every time he'd run so as not to arouse any suspicion when the real day arrived. Therefore, with some confidence, I went all the way down the line staking three pounds with each book. I didn't hurry, but I didn't waste any time either, and after each bet I wrote the amount on the back of the card before slipping it into my pocket. There were seventeen bookies. I had seventeen tickets and had laid out fifty-one pounds without disturbing the price one point. Forty-nine pounds left to get on. I glanced quickly down the hill. One owner and his dog had already reached the traps. The others were only twenty or thirty yards away. Except for Claud. Claud and Jackie were only half way there. I could see Claud in his old khaki greatcoat sauntering slowly along with Jackie pulling ahead keenly on the leash, and once I saw him stop completely and bend down pretending to pick something up. When he went on again he seemed to have developed a limp so as to go slower still. I hurried back to the other end of the line to start again.

"Three pounds Black Panther."

The bookmaker, the one with the magenta face and the white substance around the mouth, glanced up sharply, remembering the last time, and in one swift almost graceful movement of the arm he licked his fingers and wiped the figure twenty-five neatly off the board. His wet fingers left a small dark patch opposite Black Panther's name.

"All right, you got one more seventy-five to three; he said. "But that's the lot." Then he raised his voice and shouted, "Fifteen to one Black Panther! Fifteens the Panther!"

All down the line the twenty-fives were wiped out and it was fifteen to one the Panther now. I took it quick, but by the time I was through the bookies had had enough and they weren't quoting him any more. They'd only taken six pounds each, but they stood to lose a hundred and fifty, and for them--small-time bookies at a little country flapping-track--that was quite e

nough for one race, thank you very much. I felt pleased the way I'd managed it. Lots of tickets now. I took them out of my pockets and counted them and they were like a thin pack of cards in my hand. Thirty-three tickets in all. And what did we stand to win? Let me see... something over two thousand pounds. Claud had said he'd win it thirty lengths. Where was Claud now?

Far away down the hill I could see the khaki greatcoat standing by the traps and the big black dog alongside. All the other dogs were already in and the owners were beginning to walk away. Claud was bending down, coaxing Jackie into number four, and then he was closing the door and turning away and beginning to run up the hill towards the crowd, the greatcoat flapping around him. He kept looking back over his shoulder as he ran.

Beside the traps the starter stood, and his hand was up waving a handkerchief. At the other end of the track, beyond the winning-post, quite close to where I stood, the man in the blue jersey was straddling the upturned bicycle on top of the wooden platform and he saw the signal and waved back and began to turn the pedals with his hands. Then a tiny white dot in the distance--the artificial hare that was in reality a football with a piece of white rabbit-skin tacked on to it--began to move away from the traps, accelerating fast. The traps went up and the dogs flew out. They flew out in a single dark lump, all together, as though it were one wide dog instead of six, and almost at once I saw Jackie drawing away from the field. I knew it was Jackie because of the colour. There weren't any other black dogs in the race. It was Jackie, all right. Don't move, I told myself, Don't move a muscle or an eyelid or a toe or a finger-tip. Stand quite still and don't move. Watch him going. Come on Jackson, boy! No, don't shout. It's unlucky to shout. And don't move. Be all over in twenty seconds. Round the sharp bend now and coming up the hill and he must be fifteen or twenty lengths clear. Easy twenty lengths. Don't count the lengths, it's unlucky. And don't move. Don't move your head. Watch him out of your eye-corners. Watch that Jackson go! He's really laying down to it now up that hill. He's won it now! He can't lose it now..

When I got over to him he was fighting the rabbit-skin and trying to pick it up in his mouth, but his muzzle wouldn't allow it, and the other dogs were pounding up behind him and suddenly they were all on top of him grabbing for the rabbit and I got hold of him round the neck and dragged him clear like Claud had said and knelt down on the grass and held him tight with both arms round his body. The other catchers were having a time all trying to grab their own dogs.

Then Claud was beside me, blowing heavily, unable to speak from blowing and excitement, removing Jackie's muzzle, putting on the collar and lead, and Mr Feasey was there too standing with hands on hips, the button mouth pursed up tight like a mushroom, the two little cameras staring at Jackie all over again.

"So that's the game, is it?" he said.

Claud was bending over the dog and acting like he hadn't heard.

"I don't want you here no more after this, you understand that?"

Claud went on fiddling with Jackie's collar.

I heard someone behind us saying, "That flatfaced bastard swung it properly on old Feasey this time." Someone else laughed. Mr Feasey walked away, Claud straightened up and went over with Jackie to the hare driver in the blue jersey who had dismounted from his platform.

"Cigarette," Claud said, offering the pack.

The man took one, also the five pound note that was folded up small in Claud's fingers.

"Thanks," Claud said. "Thanks very much."

"Don't mention," the man said. Then Claud turned to me. "You get it all on, Gordon?" He was jumping up and down and rubbing his hands and patting Jackie, and his lips trembled as he spoke.

"Yes. Half at twenty-fives, half at fifteens."

"Oh Christ, Gordon, that's marvellous. Wait here till I get the suitcase."

"You take Jackie," I said, "and go and sit in the car. I'll see you later."

There was nobody around the bookies now. I was the only one with anything to collect, and I walked slowly with a sort of dancing stride and a wonderful bursting feeling in my chest, towards the first one in the line, the man with the magenta face and the white substance on his mouth. I stood in front of him and I took all the time I wanted going through my pack of tickets to find the two that were his. The name was Syd Pratchett.

It was written up large across his board in gold letters on a scarlet field 'SYD PRATCHETT. THE BEST ODDS IN THE MIDLANDS. PROMPT SETTLEMENTS.'

I handed him the first ticket and said, "Seventy-eight pounds to come." It sounded so good I said it again, making a delicious little song of it. "Seventy-eight pounds to come on this one." I didn't mean to gloat over Mr Pratchett. As a matter of fact, I was beginning to like him quite a lot. I even felt sorry for him having to fork out so much money. I hoped his wife and kids wouldn't suffer.

"Number forty-two," Mr Pratchett said, turning to his clerk who held the big book. "Forty-two wants seventy-eight pounds." There was a pause while the clerk ran his finger down the column of recorded bets. He did this twice, then he looked up at the boss and began to shake his head.

"No," he said. "Don't pay. That ticket backed Snailbox Lady."

Mr Pratchett, standing on his box, leaned over and peered down at the book. He seemed to be disturbed by what the clerk had said, and there was a look of genuine concern on the huge magenta face.

The clerk is a fool, I thought, and any moment now Mr Pratchett's going to tell him so.

But when Mr Pratchett turned back to me, the eyes had become narrow and hostile. "Now, look Charley," he said softly. "Don't let's have any of that. You know very well you bet Snailbox. What's the idea?"

"I bet Black Panther," I said. "Two separate bets of three pounds each at twenty-five to one. Here's the second ticket."

This time he didn't even bother to check it with the book. "You bet Snailbox, Charley," he said. "I remember you coming round." With that, he turned away from me and started wiping the names of the last race runners off his board with a wet rag. Behind him, the clerk had closed the book and was lighting himself a cigarette. I stood watching them, and I could feel the sweat beginning to break through the skin all over my body.

"Let me see the book."

Mr Pratchett blew his nose in the wet rag and dropped it to the ground.

"Look," he said, "why don't you go away and stop annoying me?"

The point was this: a bookmaker's ticket, unlike a totalisator ticket, never has anything written on it regarding the nature of your bet. This is normal practice, the same at every racetrack in the country, whether it's the Silver Ring at Newmarket, the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, or a tiny country flapping-track near Oxford. All you receive is a card bearing the bookie's name and a serial number. The wager is (or should be) recorded by the bookie's clerk in his book alongside the number of the ticket, but apart from that there is no evidence at all of how you betted.

"Go on," Mr Pratchett was saying. "Hop it."

I stepped back a pace and glanced down the long line of bookmakers. None of them was looking my way. Each was standing motionless on his little wooden box beside his wooden placard, staring straight ahead into the crowd. I went up to the next one and presented a ticket.

"I had three pounds on Black Panther at twenty-five to one," I said firmly. "Seventy-eight pounds to come."

This man, who had a soft inflamed face, went through exactly the same routine as Mr Pratchett, questioning his clerk, peering at the book, and giving me the same answers.

"Whatever's the matter with you?" he said quietly, speaking to me as though I were eight years old. "Trying such a silly thing as that."

This time I stepped well back. "You dirty thieving bastards!" I cried. "The whole lot of you!"

Automatically, as though they were puppets, all the heads down the line flicked round and looked at me. The expressions didn't alter. It was just the heads that moved, all seventeen of them, and seventeen pairs of cold glassy eyes looked down at me. There was not the faintest flicker of interest in any of them.

'Somebody spoke,' they seemed to be saying. 'We didn't hear it. It's a nice

day today.'

The crowd, sensing excitement, was beginning to move in around me. I ran back to Mr Pratchett, right up close to him and poked him in the stomach with my finger. "You're a thief! A lousy little thief!" I shouted.

The extraordinary thing was, Mr Pratchett didn't seem to resent this at all.

"Well, I never," he said. "Look who's talking."

Then suddenly the big face broke into a wide, frog-like grin, and he looked over at the crowd and shouted. "Look who's talking!"

All at once everybody started to laugh. Down the line the bookies were coming to life and turning to each other and laughing and pointing at me and shouting, "Look who's talking! Look who's talking!" The crowd began to take up the cry as well, and I stood there on the grass alongside Mr Pratchett with his wad of tickets as thick as a pack of cards in my hand, listening to them and feeling slightly hysterical. Over the heads of the people I could see Mr Feasey beside his blackboard, already chalking up the runners for the next race; and then beyond him, far away up the top of the field, I caught sight of Claud standing by the van, waiting for me with the suitcase in his hand.

It was time to go home.

===== EIGHT FURTHER TALES C
THE UNEXPECTED ===== The Umb

Man 'M going to tell you about a funny thing that happened to my mother and me yesterday evening. I am twelve years old and I'm a girl. My mother is thirty-four but I am nearly as tall as her already.

Yesterday afternoon, my mother took me up to London to see the dentist. He found one hole. It was in a back tooth and he filled it without hurting me too much. After that, we went to a cafŽ. I had a banana split and my mother had a cup of coffee. By the time we got up to leave it was about six o'clock.

When we came out of the cafŽ it had started to rain. "We must get a taxi," my mother said. We were wearing ordinary hats and coats, and it was raining quite hard.

"Why don't we go back into the cafŽ and wait for it to stop?" I said. I wanted another of those banana splits. They were gorgeous.

"It isn't going to stop," my mother said. "We must get home."

We stood on the pavement in the rain, looking for a taxi. Lots of them came by but they all had passengers inside them. "I wish we had a car with a chauffeur," my mother said.

Just then a man came up to us. He was a small man and he was pretty old, probably seventy or more. He raised his hat politely and said to my mother

her, "Excuse me, I do hope you will excuse me..." He had a fine white moustache and bushy white eyebrows and a wrinkly pink face. He was sheltering under an umbrella which he held high over his head.

"Yes?" my mother said, very cool and distant.

"I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you," he said. "It is only a very small favour."

I saw my mother looking at him suspiciously. She is a suspicious person, my mother. She is especially suspicious of two things--strange men and boiled eggs. When she cuts the top off a boiled egg, she pokes around inside it with her spoon as though expecting to find a mouse or something. With strange men, she has a golden rule which says, 'The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become.' This little old man was particularly nice. He was polite. He was well-spoken. He was well-dressed. He was a real gentleman. The reason I knew he was a gentleman was because of his shoes. 'You can always spot a gentleman by the shoes he wears,' was another of my mother's favourite sayings. This man had beautiful brown shoes.

"The truth of the matter is," the little man was saying, "I've got myself into a bit of a scrape. I need some help. Not much I assure you. It's almost nothing, in fact, but I do need it. You see, madam, old people like me often become terribly forgetful..."

My mother's chin was up and she was staring down at him along the full length of her nose. It was a fearsome thing, this frosty-nosed stare of my mother's. Most people go to pieces completely when she gives it to them. I once saw my own headmistress begin to stammer and simper like an idiot when my mother gave her a really foul frosty-noser. But the little man on the pavement with the umbrella over his head didn't bat an eyelid. He gave a gentle smile and said, "I beg you to believe, madam, that I am not in the habit of stopping ladies in the street and telling them my troubles."

"I should hope not," my mother said.

I felt quite embarrassed by my mother's sharpness. I wanted to say to her, 'Oh, mummy, for heaven's sake, he's a very very old man, and he's sweet and polite, and he's in some sort of trouble, so don't be so beastly to him.' But I didn't say anything.

The little man shifted his umbrella from one hand to the other. "I've never forgotten it before," he said.

"You've never forgotten what?" my mother asked sternly.

"My wallet," he said. "I must have left it in my other jacket. Isn't that the silliest thing to do?"

"Are you asking me to give you money?" my mother said.

"Oh, good gracious me, no!" he cried. "Heaven forbid I should ever do that!"

"Then what are you asking?" my mother said. "Do hurry up. We're getting

soaked to the skin here."

"I know you are," he said. "And that is why I'm offering you this umbrella of mine to protect you, and to keep forever, if... if only... "If only what?" my mother said.

"If only you would give me in return a pound for my taxi-fare just to get me home."

My mother was still suspicious. "If you had no money in the first place," she said, "then how did you get here?"

"I walked," he answered. "Every day I go for a lovely long walk and then I summon a taxi to take me home. I do it every day of the year."

"Why don't you walk home now?" my mother asked.

"Oh, I wish I could," he said. "I do wish I could. But I don't think I could manage it on these silly old legs of mine. I've gone too far already."

My mother stood there chewing her lower lip. She was beginning to melt a bit, I could see that. And the idea of getting an umbrella to shelter under must have tempted her a good deal.

"It's a lovely umbrella," the little man said.

"So I've noticed," my mother said.

"It's silk," he said.

"I can see that."

"Then why don't you take it, madam," he said. "It cost me over twenty pounds, I promise you. But that's of no importance so long as I can get home and rest these old legs of mine."

I saw my mother's hand feeling for the clasp of her purse. She saw me watching her. I was giving her one of my own frosty-nosed looks this time and she knew exactly what I was telling her. Now listen, mummy, I was telling her, you simply mustn't take advantage of a tired old man in this way. It's a rotten thing to do. My mother paused and looked back at me. Then she said to the little man, "I don't think it's quite right that I should take an umbrella from you worth twenty pounds. I think I'd better just give you the taxi-fare and be done with it."

"No, no no!" he cried. "It's out of the question! I wouldn't dream of it! Not in a million years! I would never accept money from you like that! Take the umbrella, dear lady, and keep the rain off your shoulders!"

My mother gave me a triumphant sideways look. There you are, she was telling me. You're wrong. He wants me to have it.

She fished into her purse and took out a pound note. She held it out to the little man. He took it and handed her the umbrella. He pocketed the pound, raised his hat, gave a quick bow from the waist, and said, "Thank you, madam, thank you." Then he was gone.

"Come under here and keep dry, darling," my mother said. "Aren't we lucky. I've never had a silk umbrella before. I couldn't afford it."

"Why were you so horrid to him in the beginning?" I asked.

"I wanted to satisfy myself he wasn't a trickster," she said. "And I did. He was a gentleman. I'm very pleased I was able to help him."

"Yes, mummy," I said.

"A real gentleman," she went on. "Wealthy, too, otherwise he wouldn't have had a silk umbrella. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't a titled person. Sir Harry Goldsworthy or something like that."

"Yes, mummy."

"This will be a good lesson to you," she went on. "Never rush things. Always take your time when you are summing someone up. Then you'll never make mistakes."

"There he goes," I said. "Look."

"Where?"

"Over there. He's crossing the street. Goodness, mummy, what a hurry he's in."

We watched the little man as he dodged nimbly in and out of the traffic. When he reached the other side of the street, he turned left, walking very fast

"He doesn't look very tired to me, does he to you, mummy?"

My mother didn't answer.

"He doesn't look as though he's trying to get a taxi, either," I said.

My mother was standing very still and stiff, staring across the street at the little man. We could see him clearly. He was in a terrific hurry. He was bustling along the pavement, sidestepping the other pedestrians and swinging his arms like a soldier on the march.

"He's up to something," my mother said, stony-faced.

"But what?"

"I don't know," my mother snapped. "But I'm going to find out. Come with me." She took my arm and we crossed the street together. Then we turned left.

"Can you see him?" my mother asked.

"Yes. There he is. He's turning right down the next street." We came to the corner and turned right. The little man was about twenty yards ahead of us. He was scuttling along like a rabbit and we had to walk very fast to keep up with him. The rain was pelting down harder than ever now and I could see it dripping from the brim of his hat on to his shoulders. But we were snug and dry under our lovely big silk umbrella.

"What is he up to?" my mother said.

"What if he turns round and sees us?" I asked.

"I don't care if he does," my mother said. "He lied to us. He said he was too tired to walk any further and he's practically running us off our feet! He's a barefaced liar! He's a crook!"

"You mean he's not a titled gentleman?" I asked.

"Be quiet," she said.

At the next crossing, the little man turned right again.

Then he turned left.

Then right.

"I'm not giving up now," my mother said.

"He's disappeared!" I cried. "Where's he gone?"

"He went in that door!" my mother said. "I saw him! Into that house! Great heavens, it's a pub!"

It was a pub. In big letters right across the front it said THE RED LION.

"You're not going in are you, mummy?"

"No," she said. "We'll watch from outside."

There was a big plate-glass window along the front of the pub, and although it was a bit steamy on the inside, we could see through it very well if we went close.

We stood huddled together outside the pub window. I was clutching my mother's arm. The big raindrops were making a loud noise on our umbrella. "There he is," I said. "Over there."

The room we were looking into was full of people and cigarette smoke, and our little man was in the middle of it all. He was now without his hat and coat, and he was edging his way through the crowd towards the bar. When he reached it, he placed both hands on the bar itself and spoke to the barman. I saw his lips moving as he gave his order. The barman turned away from him for a few seconds and came back with a smallish tumbler filled to the brim with light brown liquid. The little man placed a pound note on the counter.

"That's my pound!" my mother hissed. "By golly, he's got a nerve!"

"What's in the glass?" I asked.

"Whisky," my mother said. "Neat whisky."

The barman didn't give him any change from the pound.

"That must be a treble whisky," my mummy said.

"What's a treble?" I asked.

"Three times the normal measure," she answered.

The little man picked up the glass and put it to his lips. He tilted it gently. Then he tilted it higher... and higher... and higher... and very soon all the whisky had disappeared down his throat in one long pour. "That's a jolly expensive drink," I said.

"It's ridiculous!" my mummy said. "Fancy paying a pound for something to swallow in one go!"

"It cost him more than a pound," I said. "It cost him a twenty-pound silk umbrella."

"So it did," my mother said. "He must be mad."

The little man was standing by the bar with the empty glass in his hand. He was smiling now, and a sort of golden glow of pleasure was spreading over his round pink face. I saw his tongue come out to lick the white moustache, as though searching for one last drop of that precious whisky.

Slowly, he turned away from the bar and edged his way back through the crowd to where his hat and coat were hanging. He put on his hat. He put on his coat. Then, in a manner so superbly cool and casual that you hardly noticed anything at all, he lifted from the coat-rack one of the many wet umbrellas hanging there, and off he went.

"Did you see that!" my mother shrieked. "Did you see what he did!"

"Sssh!" I whispered. "He's coming out!"

We lowered our umbrella to hide our faces, and peered out from under it.

Out he came. But he never looked in our direction. He opened his new umbrella over his head and scurried off down the road the way he had come.

"So that's his little game!" my mother said.

"Neat," I said. "Super." We followed him back to the main street where we had first met him, and we watched him as he proceeded, with no trouble at all, to exchange his new umbrella for another pound note. This time it was with a tall thin fellow who didn't even have a coat or hat. And as soon as the transaction was completed, our little man trotted off down the street and was lost in the crowd. But this time he went in the opposite direction.

"You see how clever he is!" my mother said. "He never goes to the same pub twice!"

"He could go on doing this all night," I said.

"Yes," my mother said. "Of course. But I'll bet he prays like mad for rainy days."

Mr Botibol

MR BOTIBOL pushed his way through the revolving doors and emerged into the large foyer of the hotel. He took off his hat, and holding it in front of him with both hands, he advanced nervously a few paces, paused and stood looking around him, searching the faces of the lunchtime crowd. Several people turned and stared at him in mild astonishment, and he heard--or he thought he heard--at least one woman's voice saying, "My dear, do look what's just come in!"

At last he spotted Mr Clements sitting at a small table in the far corner, and he hurried over to him. Clements had seen him coming, and now, as he watched Mr Botibol threading his way cautiously between the tables and the people, walking on his toes in such a meek and self-effacing manner and c

lutching his hat before him with both hands, he thought how wretched it must be for any man to look as conspicuous and as odd as this Botibol. He resembled, to an extraordinary degree, an asparagus. His long narrow stalk did not appear to have any shoulders at all; it merely tapered upwards, growing gradually narrower and narrower until it came to a kind of point at the top of the small bald head. He was tightly encased in a shiny blue double-breasted suit, and this, for some curious reason, accentuated the illusion of a vegetable to a preposterous degree.

Clements stood up, they shook hands, and then at once, even before they had sat down again, Mr Botibol said, "I have decided, yes I have decided to accept the offer which you made to me before you left my office last night."

For some days Clements had been negotiating, on behalf of clients, for the purchase of the firm known as Botibol & Co., of which Mr Botibol was sole owner, and the night before, Clements had made his first offer. This was merely an exploratory, much-too-low bid, a kind of signal to the seller that the buyers were seriously interested. And by God, thought Clements, the poor fool has gone and accepted it. He nodded gravely many times in an effort to hide his astonishment, and he said, "Good, good. I'm so glad to hear that, Mr Botibol." Then he signalled a waiter and said, "Two large martinis."

"No, please!" Mr Botibol lifted both hands in horrified protest.

"Come on," Clements said. "This is an occasion."

"I drink very little, and never, no never during the middle of the day."

But Clements was in a gay mood now and he took no notice. He ordered the martinis and when they came along Mr Botibol was forced, by the banter and good-humour of the other, to drink to the deal which had just been concluded. Clements then spoke briefly about the drawing up and signing of documents, and when all that had been arranged, he called for two more cocktails.

Again Mr Botibol protested, but not quite so vigorously this time, and Clements ordered the drinks and then he turned and smiled at the other man in a friendly way. "Well, Mr Botibol," he said, "now that it's all over, I suggest we have a pleasant non-business lunch together. What d'you say to that? And it's on me."

"As you wish, as you wish," Mr Botibol answered without any enthusiasm. He had a small melancholy voice and a way of pronouncing each word separately and slowly, as though he was explaining something to a child.

When they went into the dining-room Clements ordered a bottle of Lafite 1912 and a couple of plump roast partridges to go with it. He had already calculated in his head the amount of his commission and he was feeling fine. He began to make bright conversation, switching smoothly from one subject to another in the hope of touching on something that might interest his guest. But it was no good. Mr Botibol appeared to be only half listening. Eve

ry now and then he inclined his small bald head a little to one side or the other and said, "Indeed." When the wine came along Clements tried to have a talk about that.

"I am sure it is excellent," Mr Botibol said, "but please give me only a drop."

Clements told a funny story. When it was over, Mr Botibol regarded him solemnly for a few moments, then he said, "How amusing." After that Clements kept his mouth shut and they ate in silence. Mr Botibol was drinking his wine and he didn't seem to object when his host reached over and refilled his glass. By the time they had finished eating, Clements estimated privately that his guest had consumed at least three-quarters of the bottle.

"A cigar, Mr Botibol?"

"Oh no, thank you."

"A little brandy?"

"No really. I am not accustomed.."

Clements noticed that the man's cheeks were slightly flushed and that his eyes had become bright and watery. Might as well get the old boy properly drunk while I'm about it, he thought, and to the waiter he said, "Two brandies."

When the brandies arrived, Mr Botibol looked at his large glass suspiciously for a while, then he picked it up, took one quick birdlike sip and put it down again. "Mr Clements," he said suddenly, "how I envy you."

"Me? But why?"

"I will tell you, Mr Clements, I will tell you, if I may make so bold." There was a nervous, mouselike quality in his voice which made it seem he was apologizing for everything he said.

"Please tell me," Clements said.

"It is because to me you appear to have made such a success of your life."

He's going to get melancholy drunk, Clements thought. He's one of the ones that gets melancholy and I can't stand it. "Success," he said, "I don't see anything especially successful about me."

"Oh yes, indeed. Your whole life, if I may say so, Mr Clements, appears to be such a pleasant and successful thing."

"I'm a very ordinary person," Clements said. He was trying to figure just how drunk the other really was.

"I believe," said Mr Botibol, speaking slowly, separating each word carefully from the other, "I believe that the wine has gone a little to my head, but ... " He paused, searching for words. "... But I do want to ask you just one question." He had poured some salt on to the tablecloth and he was shaping it into a little mountain with the tip of one finger.

"Mr Clements," he said without looking up, "do you think that it is possi

ble for a man to live to the age of fifty-two without ever during his whole life having experienced one single small success in anything that he has done?"

"My dear Mr Botibol," Clements laughed, "everyone has his little successes from time to time, however small they may be."

"Oh no," Mr Botibol said gently. "You are wrong. I, for example, cannot remember having had a single success of any sort during my whole life."

"Now come!" Clements said, smiling. "That can't be true. Why only this morning you sold your business for a hundred thousand. I call that one hell of a success."

"The business was left me by my father. When he died nine years ago, it was worth four times as much. Under my direction it has lost three-quarters of its value. You can hardly call that a success."

Clements knew this was true. "Yes, yes, all right," he said. "That may be so, but all the same you know as well as I do that every man alive has his quota of little successes. Not big ones maybe. But lots of little ones. I mean, after all, goddammit, even scoring a goal at school was a little success, a little triumph, at the time; or making some runs or learning to swim. One forgets about them, that's all. One just forgets."

"I never scored a goal," Mr Botibol said. "And I never learned to swim."

Clements threw up his hands and made exasperated noises. "Yes yes, I know, but don't you see, don't you see there are thousands, literally thousands of other things like... well like catching a good fish, or fixing the motor of the car, or pleasing someone with a present, or growing a decent row of French beans, or winning a little bet or... or... why hell, one can go on listing them for ever!"

"Perhaps you can, Mr Clements, but to the best of my knowledge, I have never done any of those things. That is what I am trying to tell you."

Clements put down his brandy glass and stared with new interest at the remarkable shoulderless person who sat facing him. He was annoyed and he didn't feel in the least sympathetic. The man didn't inspire sympathy. He was a fool. He must be a fool. A tremendous and absolute fool. Clements had a sudden desire to embarrass the man as much as he could. "What about women, Mr Botibol?" There was no apology for the question in the tone of his voice.

"Women?"

"Yes women! Every man under the sun, even the most wretched filthy down-and-out tramp has some time or other had some sort of silly little success with..." "Never!" cried Mr Botibol with sudden vigour. "No sir, never!"

I'm going to hit him, Clements told himself. I can't stand this any longer and if I'm not careful I'm going to jump right up and hit him. "You mean you don't like them?" he said.

"Oh dear me yes, of course. I like them. As a matter of fact I admire them very much, very much indeed. But I'm afraid... oh dear me I do not know how to say it... I am afraid that I do not seem to get along with them very well. I never have. Never. You see, Mr Clements, I look queer. I know I do. They stare at me, and often I see them laughing at me. I have never been able to get within... well, within striking distance of them, as you might say." The trace of a smile, weak and infinitely sad, flickered around the corners of his mouth.

Clements had had enough. He mumbled something about how he was sure Mr Botibol was exaggerating the situation, then he glanced at his watch, called for the bill, and he said he was sorry but he would have to get back to the office.

They parted in the street outside the hotel and Mr Botibol took a cab back to his house. He opened the front door, went into the living-room and switched on the radio; then he sat down in a large leather chair, leaned back and closed his eyes. He didn't feel exactly giddy, but there was a singing in his ears and his thoughts were coming and going more quickly than usual. That solicitor gave me too much wine, he told himself. I'll stay here for a while and listen to some music and I expect I'll go to sleep and after that I'll feel better.

They were playing a symphony on the radio. Mr Botibol had always been a casual listener to symphony concerts and he knew enough to identify this as one of Beethoven's. But now, as he lay back in his chair listening to the marvellous music, a new thought began to expand slowly within his tipsy mind. It wasn't a dream because he was not asleep. It was a clear conscious thought and it was this: I am the composer of this music. I am a great composer. This is my latest symphony and this is the first performance. The huge hall is packed with people--critics, musicians and music-lovers from all over the country--and I am up there in front of the orchestra, conducting.

Mr Botibol could see the whole thing. He could see himself up on the rostrum dressed in a white tie and tails, and before him was the orchestra, the massed violins on his left, the violas in front, the cellos on his right, and back of them were all the woodwinds and bassoons and drums and cymbals, the players watching every moment of his baton with an intense, almost a fanatical reverence. Behind him, in the half-darkness of the huge hall, was row upon row of white enraptured faces, looking up towards him, listening with growing excitement as yet another new symphony by the greatest composer the world has ever seen unfolded itself majestically before them. Some of the audience were clenching their fists and digging their nails into the palms of their hands because the music was so beautiful that they could hardly stand it. Mr Botibol became so carried away by this exciting vision that he began to swing his arms in time with the music in the manner of a cond

uctor. He found it was such fun doing this that he decided to stand up, facing the radio, in order to give himself more freedom of movement.

He stood there in the middle of the room, tall, thin and shoulderless, dressed in his tight blue double-breasted suit, his small bald head jerking from side to side as he waved his arms in the air. He knew the symphony well enough to be able occasionally to anticipate changes in tempo or volume, and when the music became loud and fast he beat the air so vigorously that he nearly knocked himself over, when it was soft and hushed, he leaned forward to quieten the players with gentle movements of his outstretched hands, and all the time he could feel the presence of the huge audience behind him, tense, immobile, listening. When at last the symphony swelled to its tremendous conclusion, Mr Botibol became more frenzied than ever and his face seemed to thrust itself round to one side in an agony of effort as he tried to force more and still more power from his orchestra during those final mighty chords.

Then it was over. The announcer was saying something, but Mr Botibol quickly switched off the radio and collapsed into his chair, blowing heavily.

"Phew!" he said aloud. "My goodness gracious me, what have I been doing!" Small globules of sweat were oozing out all over his face and forehead, trickling down his neck inside his collar. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped them away, and he lay there for a while, panting, exhausted, but exceedingly exhilarated.

"Well, I must say," he gasped, still speaking aloud, "that was fun. I don't know that I have ever had such fun before in all my life. My goodness, it was fun, it really was!" Almost at once he began to play with the idea of doing it again. But should he? Should he allow himself to do it again? There was no denying that now, in retrospect, he felt a little guilty about the whole business, and soon he began to wonder whether there wasn't something downright immoral about it all. Letting himself go like that! And imagining he was a genius! It was wrong. He was sure other people didn't do it. And what if Mason had come in the middle and seen him at it! That would have been terrible!

He reached for the paper and pretended to read it, but soon he was searching furtively among the radio programmes for the evening. He put his finger under a line which said '8.30 Symphony Concert. Brahms Symphony No .2'. He stared at it for a long time. The letters in the word 'Brahms' began to blur and recede, and gradually they disappeared altogether and were replaced by letters which spelt 'Botibol'. Botibol's Symphony No .2. It was printed quite clearly. He was reading it now, this moment. "Yes, yes," he whispered. "First performance. The world is waiting to hear it. Will it be as great, they are asking, will it perhaps be greater than his earlier work? And the composer himself had been persuaded to conduct. He is shy and retiring,

hardly ever appears in public, but on this occasion he has been persuaded..

Mr Botibol leaned forward in his chair and pressed the bell beside the fireplace. Mason, the butler, the only other person in the house, ancient, small and grave, appeared at the door.

"Er... Mason, have we any wine in the house?"

"Wine, sir?"

"Yes, wine."

"Oh no, sir. We haven't had any wine this fifteen or sixteen years. Your father, sir..

"I know, Mason, I know, but will you get some please. I want a bottle with my dinner."

The butler was shaken. "Very well, sir, and what shall it be?"

"Claret, Mason. The best you can obtain. Get a case. Tell them to send it round at once."

When he was alone again, he was momentarily appalled by the simple manner in which he had made his decision. Wine for dinner! Just like that! Well, yes, why not? Why ever not now he came to think of it? He was his own master. And anyway it was essential that he have wine. It seemed to have a good effect, a very good effect indeed. He wanted it and he was going to have it and to hell with Mason.

He rested for the remainder of the afternoon, and at seven-thirty Mason announced dinner. The bottle of wine was on the table and he began to drink it. He didn't give a damn about the way Mason watched him as he refilled his glass. Three times he refilled it; then he left the table saying that he was not to be disturbed and returned to the living-room. There was quarter of an hour to wait. He could think of nothing now except the coming concert. He lay back in the chair and allowed his thoughts to wander deliciously towards eight-thirty. He was the great composer waiting impatiently in his dressing-room in the concert-hall. He could hear in the distance the murmur of excitement from the crowd as they settled themselves in their seats. He knew what they were saying to each other. Same sort of thing the newspapers had been saying for months. Botibol is a genius, greater, far greater than Beethoven or Bach or Brahms or Mozart or any of them. Each new work of his is more magnificent than the last. What will the next one be like? We can hardly wait to hear it! Oh yes, he knew what they were saying. He stood up and began to pace the room. It was nearly time now. He seized a pencil from the table to use as a baton, then he switched on the radio. The announcer had just finished the preliminaries and suddenly there was a burst of applause which meant that the conductor was coming on to the platform. The previous concert in the afternoon had been from gramophone records, but this one was the real thing. Mr Botibol turned around, faced the fireplace and bowed graciously from the waist. Then he turned back to the radio and lifted

his baton. The clapping stopped. There was a moment's silence. Someone in the audience coughed. Mr Botibol waited. The symphony began.

Once again, as he began to conduct, he could see clearly before him the whole orchestra and the faces of the players and even the expressions on their faces. Three of the violinists had grey hair. One of the cellists was very fat, another wore heavy brown-rimmed glasses, and there was a man in the second row playing a horn who had a twitch on one side of his face. But they were all magnificent. And so was the music. During certain impressive passages Mr Botibol experienced a feeling of exultation so powerful that it made him cry out for joy, and once during the Third Movement, a little shiver of ecstasy radiated spontaneously from his solar plexus and moved downward over the skin of his stomach like needles. But the thunderous applause and the cheering which came at the end of the symphony was the most splendid thing of all. He turned slowly towards the fireplace and bowed. The clapping continued and he went on bowing until at last the noise died away and the announcer's voice jerked him suddenly back into the living-room. He switched off the radio and collapsed into his chair, exhausted but very happy.

As he lay there, smiling with pleasure, wiping his wet face, panting for breath, he was already making plans for his next performance. But why not do it properly? Why not convert one of the rooms into a sort of concert-hall and have a stage and row of chairs and do the thing properly? And have a gramophone so that one could perform at any time without having to rely on the radio programme. Yes by heavens, he would do it!

The next morning Mr Botibol arranged with a firm of decorators that the largest room in the house be converted into a miniature concert-hall. There was to be a raised stage at one end and the rest of the floor-space was to be filled with rows of red plush seats. "I'm going to have some little concerts here," he told the man from the firm, and the man nodded and said that would be very nice. At the same time he ordered a radio shop to install an expensive self-changing gramophone with two powerful amplifiers, one on the stage, the other at the back of the auditorium. When he had done this, he went off and bought all of Beethoven's nine symphonies on gramophone records, and from a place which specialized in recorded sound effects he ordered several records of clapping and applauding by enthusiastic audiences. Finally he bought himself a conductor's baton, a slim ivory stick which lay in a case lined with blue silk.

In eight days the room was ready. Everything was perfect; the red chairs, the aisle down the centre and even a little dais on the platform with a brass rail running round it for the conductor. Mr Botibol decided to give the first concert that evening after dinner.

At seven o'clock he went up to his bedroom and changed into white tie and tails. He felt marvellous. When he looked at himself in the mirror, the si

ght of his own grotesque shoulderless figure didn't worry him in the least. A great composer, he thought, smiling, can look as he damn well pleases. People expect him to look peculiar. All the same he wished he had some hair on his head. He would have liked to let it grow rather long. He went downstairs to dinner, ate his food rapidly, drank half a bottle of wine and felt better still. "Don't worry about me, Mason," he said. "I'm not mad. I'm just enjoying myself."

"Yes, sir."

"I shan't want you any more. Please see that I'm not disturbed." Mr Botibol went from the dining-room into the miniature concert-hall. He took out the records of Beethoven's First Symphony, but before putting them on the gramophone, he placed two other records with them. The one, which was to be played first of all, before the music began, was labelled 'prolonged enthusiastic applause'. The other, which would come at the end of the symphony, was labelled 'Sustained applause, clapping, cheering, shouts of encore'. By a simple mechanical device on the record changer, the gramophone people had arranged that the sound from the first and the last records--the applause--would come only from the loudspeaker in the auditorium. The sound from all the others--the music--would come from the speaker hidden among the chairs of the orchestra. When he had arranged the records in the concert order, he placed them on the machine but he didn't switch on at once. Instead he turned out all the lights in the room except one small one which lit up the conductor's dais and he sat down in the chair up on the stage, closed his eyes and allowed his thoughts to wander into the usual delicious regions; the great composer, nervous, impatient, waiting to present his latest masterpiece, the audience assembling, the murmur of their excited talk, and so on. Having dreamed himself right into the part, he stood up, picked up his baton and switched on the gramophone.

A tremendous wave of clapping filled the room. Mr Botibol walked across the stage, mounted the dais, faced the audience and bowed. In the darkness he could just make out the faint outline of the seats on either side of the centre aisle, but he couldn't see the faces of the people. They were making enough noise. What an ovation! Mr Botibol turned and faced the orchestra. The applause behind him died down. The next record dropped. The symphony began.

This time it was more thrilling than ever, and during the performance he registered any number of prickly sensations around his solar plexus. Once, when it suddenly occurred to him that the music was being broadcast all over the world, a sort of shiver ran right down the length of his spine. But by far the most exciting part was the applause which came at the end. They cheered and clapped and stamped and shouted encore! encore! encore! and he turned towards the darkened auditorium and bowed gravely to the left and r

ight. Then he went off the stage, but they called him back. He bowed several more times and went off again, and again they, called him back. The audience had gone mad. They simply wouldn't let him go. It was terrific. It was truly a terrific ovation.

Later, when he was resting in his chair in the other room, he was still enjoying it. He closed his eyes because he didn't want anything to break the spell. He lay there and he felt like he was floating. It was really a most marvelous floating feeling, and when he went upstairs and undressed and got into bed, it was still with him.

The following evening he conducted Beethoven's--or rather Botibol's--Second Symphony, and they were just as mad about that one as the first. The next few nights he played one symphony a night, and at the end of nine evenings he had worked through all nine of Beethoven's symphonies. It got more exciting every time because before each concert the audience kept saying, 'He can't do it again, not another masterpiece. It's not humanly possible.' But he did. They were all of them equally magnificent. The last symphony, the Ninth, was especially exciting because here the composer surprised and delighted everyone by suddenly providing a choral masterpiece. He had to conduct a huge choir as well as the orchestra itself, and Benjamino Gigli had flown over from Italy to take the tenor part. Enrico Pinza sang bass. At the end of it the audience shouted themselves hoarse. The whole musical world was on its feet cheering, and on all sides they were saying how you never could tell what wonderful things to expect next from this amazing person.

The composing, presenting and conducting of nine great symphonies in a so many days is a fair achievement for any man, and it was not astonishing that it went a little to Mr Botibol's head. He decided now that he would once again surprise his public. He would compose a mass of marvellous piano music and he himself would give the recitals. So early the next morning he set out for the show room of the people who sold Bechsteins and Steinways. He felt so brisk and fit that he walked all the way, and as he walked he hummed little snatches of new and lovely tunes for the piano. His head was full of them. All the time they kept coming to him and once, suddenly, he had the feeling the thousands of small notes, some white, some black, were cascading down a chute into his head through a hole in his head, and that his brain, his amazing musical brain, was receiving them as fast as they could come and unscrambling them and arranging them neatly in a certain order so that they made wondrous melodies. There were Nocturnes, there were Etudes and there were Waltzes, and soon, he told himself, soon he would give them all to a grateful and admiring world. When he arrived at the piano-shop, he pushed the door open and walked in with an air almost of confidence.. He had changed much in the last few days. Some of his nervousness had left him and he was no longer wholly preoccupied with what others tho

ught of his appearance. "I want," he said to the salesman, "a concert grand, but you must arrange it so that when the notes are struck, no sound is produced."

The salesman leaned forward and raised his eyebrows.

"Could that be arranged?" Mr Botibol asked.

"Yes, sir, I think so, if you desire it. But might I inquire what you intend to use the instrument for?"

"If you want to know, I'm going to pretend I'm Chopin. I'm going to sit and play while a gramophone makes the music. It gives me a kick." It came out, just like that, and Mr Botibol didn't know what had made him say it. But it was done now and he had said it and that was that. In a way he felt relieved, because he had proved he didn't mind telling people what he was doing. The man would probably answer what a jolly good idea. Or he might not. He might say well you ought to be locked up.

"So now you know," Mr Botibol said.

The salesman laughed out loud. "Ha ha! Ha ha ha! That's very good, sir. Very good indeed. Serves me right for asking silly questions." He stopped suddenly in the middle of the laugh and looked hard at Mr Botibol. "Of course, sir, you probably know that we sell a simple noiseless keyboard specially for silent practising."

"I want a concert grand," Mr Botibol said. The salesman looked at him again.

Mr Botibol chose his piano and got out of the shop as quickly as possible. He went on to the store that sold gramophone records and there he ordered a quantity of albums containing recordings of all Chopin's Nocturnes, Etudes and Waltzes, played by Arthur Rubinstein.

"My goodness, you are going to have a lovely time!"

Mr Botibol turned and saw standing beside him at the counter a squat, short-legged girl with a face as plain as a pudding.

"Yes," he answered. "Oh yes, I am." Normally he was strict about not speaking to females in public places, but this one had taken him by surprise.

"I love Chopin," the girl said. She was holding a slim brown paper bag with string handles containing a single record she had just bought. "I like him better than any of the others."

It was comforting to hear the voice of this girl after the way the piano salesman had laughed. Mr Botibol wanted to talk to her but he didn't know what to say.

The girl said, "I like the Nocturnes best, they're so soothing. Which are your favourites?"

Mr Botibol said, "Well..." The girl looked up at him and she smiled pleasantly, trying to assist with his embarrassment. It was the smile that did it. He suddenly found himself saying, "Well now, perhaps, would you, I wonder... I mean I was wondering..." She smiled again; she couldn't help it this

time. "What I mean is I would be glad if you would care to come along some time and listen to these records."

"Why how nice of you." She paused, wondering whether it was all right. "You really mean it?"

"Yes, I should be glad."

She had lived long enough in the city to discover that old men, if they are dirty old men, do not bother about trying to pick up a girl as unattractive as herself. Only twice in her life had she been accosted in public and each time the man had been drunk. But this one wasn't drunk. He was nervous and he was peculiar-looking, but he wasn't drunk. Come to think of it, it was she who had started the conversation in the first place. "It would be lovely," she said. "It really would. When could I come?"

Oh dear, Mr Botibol thought. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

"I could come tomorrow," she went on. "It's my afternoon off."

"Well, yes, certainly," he answered slowly. "Yes, of course. I'll give you my card. Here it is."

"A. W. Botibol," she read aloud. "What a funny name. Mine's Darlington. Miss L. Darlington. How d'you do, Mr Botibol." She put out her hand for him to shake. "Oh I am looking forward to this! What time shall I come?"

"Any time," he said. "Please come any time."

"Three o'clock?"

"Yes. Three o'clock."

"Lovely! I'll be there."

He watched her walk out of the shop, a squat, stumpy, thick-legged little person and my word, he thought, what have I done! He was amazed at himself. But he was not displeased. Then at once he started to worry about whether or not he should let her see his concert-hall. He worried still more when he realized that it was the only place in the house where there was a gramophone.

That evening he had no concert. Instead he sat in his chair brooding about Miss Darlington and what he should do when she arrived. The next morning they brought the piano, a fine Bechstein in dark mahogany which was carried in minus its legs and later assembled on the platform in the concert hall. It was an imposing instrument and when Mr Botibol opened it and pressed a note with his finger, it made no sound at all. He had originally intended to astonish the world with a recital of his first piano compositions--a set of Etudes--as soon as the piano arrived, but it was no good now. He was too worried about Miss Darlington and three o'clock. At lunch-time his trepidation had increased and he couldn't eat. "Mason," he said, "I'm, I'm expecting a young lady to call at three o'clock."

"A what, sir?" the butler said.

"A young lady, Mason."

"Very good, sir."

"Show her into the sitting-room."

"Yes, sir."

Precisely at three he heard the bell ring. A few moments later Mason was showing her into the room. She came in, smiling, and Mr Botibol stood up and shook her hand. "My!" she exclaimed. "What a lovely house! I didn't know I was calling on a millionaire!"

She settled her small plump body into a large armchair and Mr Botibol sat opposite. He didn't know what to say. He felt terrible. But almost at once she began to talk and she chattered away gaily about this and that for a long time without stopping. Mostly it was about his house and the furniture and the carpets and about how nice it was of him to invite her because she didn't have such an awful lot of excitement in her life. She worked hard all day and she shared a room with two other girls in a boarding-house and he could have no idea how thrilling it was for her to be here. Gradually Mr Botibol began to feel better. He sat there listening to the girl, rather liking her, nodding his bald head slowly up and down, and the more she talked, the more he liked her. She was gay and chatty, but underneath all that any fool could see that she was a lonely tired little thing. Even Mr Botibol could see that. He could see it very clearly indeed. It was at this point that he began to play with a daring and risky idea.

"Miss Darlington," he said. "I'd like to show you something." He led her out of the room straight to the little concert-hall. "Look," he said.

She stopped just inside the door. "My goodness! Just look at that! A theatre! A real little theatre!" Then she saw the piano on the platform and the conductor's dais with the brass rail running round it. "It's for concerts!" she cried. "Do you really have concerts here! Oh, Mr Botibol, how exciting!"

"Do you like it?"

"Oh yes!"

"Come back into the other room and I'll tell you about it." Her enthusiasm had given him confidence and he wanted to get going. "Come back and listen while I tell you something funny." And when they were seated in the sitting-room again, he began at once to tell her his story. He told the whole thing, right from the beginning, how one day, listening to a symphony, he had imagined himself to be the composer, how he had stood up and started to conduct, how he had got an immense pleasure out of it, how he had done it a gain with similar results and how finally he had built himself the concert-hall where already he had conducted nine symphonies. But he cheated a little bit in the telling. He said that the only real reason he did it was in order to obtain the maximum appreciation from the music. There was only one way to listen to music, he told her, only one way to make yourself listen to every single note and chord. You had to do two things at once. You had to

imagine that you had composed it, and at the same time you had to imagine that the public were hearing it for the first time. "Do you think," he said, "do you really think that any outsider has ever got half as great a thrill from a symphony as the composer himself when he first heard his work played by a full orchestra?"

"No," she answered timidly. "Of course not."

"Then become the composer! Steal his music! Take it away from him and give it to yourself!" He leaned back in his chair and for the first time she saw him smile. He had only just thought of this new complex explanation of his conduct, but to him it seemed a very good one and he smiled. "Well, what do you think, Miss Darlington?"

"I must say it's very very interesting." She was polite and puzzled but she was a long way away from him now.

"Would you like to try?"

"Oh no. Please."

"I wish you would."

"I'm afraid I don't think I should be able to feel the same way as you do about it, Mr Botibol. I don't think I have a strong enough imagination."

She could see from his eyes he was disappointed. "But I'd love to sit in the audience and listen while you do it," she added.

Then he leapt up from his chair. "I've got it!" he cried. "A piano concerto! You play the piano, I conduct. You the greatest pianist, the greatest in the world. First performance of my Piano Concerto No .1. You playing, me conducting. The greatest pianist and the greatest composer together for the first time. A tremendous occasion! The audience will go mad! There'll be queuing all night outside the hall to get in. It'll be broadcast around the world. It'll, it'll..." Mr Botibol stopped. He stood behind the chair with both hands resting on the back of the chair and suddenly he looked embarrassed and a trifle sheepish. "I'm sorry," he said, "I get worked up. You see how it is. Even the thought of another performance gets me worked up." And then plaintively, "Would you, Miss Darlington, would you play a piano concerto with me?"

"It's like children," she said, but she smiled.

"No one will know. No one but us will know anything about it."

"All right," she said at last. "I'll do it. I think I'm daft but just the same I'll do it. It'll be a bit of a lark."

"Good!" Mr Botibol cried. "When? Tonight?"

"Oh well, I don't.."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "Please. Make it tonight. Come back and have dinner here with me and we'll give the concert afterwards." Mr Botibol was excited again now. "We must make a few plans. Which is your favourite piano concerto, Miss Darlington?"

"Oh well, I should say Beethoven's Emperor."

"The Emperor it shall be. You will play it tonight. Come to dinner at seven. Evening dress. You must have evening dress for the concert."

"I've got a dancing dress but I haven't worn it for years."

"You shall wear it tonight." He paused and looked at her in silence for a moment, then quite gently, he said, "You're not worried, Miss Darlington? Perhaps you would rather not do it. I'm afraid, I'm afraid I've let myself get rather carried away. I seem to have pushed you into this. And I know how stupid it must seem to you." That's better, she thought. That's much better. Now I know it's all right. "Oh no," she said. "I'm really looking forward to it. But you frightened me a bit, taking it all so seriously."

When she had gone, he waited for five minutes, then went out into the town to the gramophone shop and bought the records of the Emperor Concerto, conductor, Toscanini--soloist, Horowitz. He returned at once, told his astonished butler that there would be a guest for dinner, then went upstairs and changed into his tails.

She arrived at seven. She was wearing a long sleeveless dress made of some shiny green material and to Mr Botibol she did not look quite so plump or quite so plain as before. He took her straight in to dinner and in spite of the silent disapproving manner in which Mason prowled around the table, the meal went well. She protested gaily when Mr Botibol gave her a second glass of wine, but she didn't refuse it. She chattered away almost without a stop throughout the three courses and Mr Botibol listened and nodded and kept refilling her glass as soon as it was half empty.

Afterwards, when they were seated in the living-room, Mr Botibol said, "Now Miss Darlington, now we begin to fall into our parts." The wine, as usual, had made him happy, and the girl, who was even less used to it than the man, was not feeling so bad either. "You, Miss Darlington, are the great pianist. What is your first name, Miss Darlington?"

"Lucille," she said. "The great pianist Lucille Darlington. I am the composer Botibol. We must talk and act and think as though we are pianist and composer."

"What is your first name, Mr Botibol? What does the A stand for?"

"Angel," he answered.

"Not Angel."

"Yes," he said irritably.

"Angel Botibol," she murmured and she began to giggle. But she checked herself and said, "I think it's a most unusual and distinguished name."

"Are you ready, Miss Darlington?"

"Yes."

Mr Botibol stood up and began pacing nervously up and down the room. He looked at his watch. "It's nearly time to go on," he said. "They tell me

the place is packed. Not an empty seat anywhere. I always get nervous before a concert. Do you get nervous, Miss Darlington?"

"Oh yes, I do, always. Especially playing with you."

"I think they'll like it. I put everything I've got into this concerto, Miss Darlington. It nearly killed me composing it. I was ill for weeks afterwards."

"Poor you," she said.

"It's time now," he said. "The orchestra are all in their places. Come on." He led her out and down the passage, then he made her wait outside the door of the concert-hall while he nipped in, arranged the lighting and switched on the gramophone. He came back and fetched her and as they walked on to the stage, the applause broke out. They both stood and bowed towards the darkened auditorium and the applause was vigorous and it went on for a long time. Then Mr Botibol mounted the dais and Miss Darlington took her seat at the piano. The applause died down. Mr Botibol held up his baton. The next record dropped and the Emperor Concerto began.

It was an astonishing affair. The thin stalk-like Mr Botibol, who had no shoulders, standing on the dais in his evening clothes waving his arms about in approximate time to the music; and the plump Miss Darlington in her shiny green dress seated at the keyboard of the enormous piano thumping the silent keys with both hands for all she was worth. She recognized the passages where the piano was meant to be silent, and on these occasions she folded her hands primly on her lap and stared straight ahead with a dreamy and enraptured expression on her face. Watching her, Mr Botibol thought that she was particularly wonderful in the slow solo passages of the Second Movement. She allowed her hands to drift smoothly and gently up and down the keys and she inclined her head first to one side, then to the other, and once she closed her eyes for a long time while she played. During the exciting last movement, Mr Botibol himself lost his balance and would have fallen off the platform had he not saved himself by clutching the brass rail. But in spite of everything, the concerto moved on majestically to its mighty conclusion. Then the real clapping came. Mr Botibol walked over and took Miss Darlington by the hand and led her to the edge of the platform, and there they stood, the two of them, bowing, and bowing, and bowing again as the clapping and the shouting of 'encore' continued. Four times they left the stage and came back, and then, the fifth time, Mr Botibol whispered, "It's you they want. You take this one alone."

"No," she said. "It's you. Please." But he pushed her forward and she took her call, and came back and said, "Now you. They want you. Can't you hear them shouting for you?" So Mr Botibol walked alone on to the stage, bowed gravely to right, left and centre and came off just as the clapping stopped altogether.

He led her straight back to the living-room. He was breathing fast and th

the sweat was pouring down all over his face. She too was a little breathless, and her cheeks were shining red.

"A tremendous performance, Miss Darlington. Allow me to congratulate you."

"But what a concerto, Mr Botibol! What a superb concerto!"

"You played it perfectly, Miss Darlington. You have a real feeling for my music." He was wiping the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. "And tomorrow we perform my Second Concerto."

"Tomorrow?"

"Of course. Had you forgotten, Miss Darlington? We are booked to appear together for a whole week."

"Oh... oh yes... I'm afraid I had forgotten that."

"But it's all right, isn't it?" he asked anxiously. "After hearing you tonight I could not bear to have anyone else play my music."

"I think it's all right," she said. "Yes, I think that'll be all right." She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "My heavens, it's late! I must go! I'll never get up in the morning to get to work!"

"To work?" Mr Botibol said. "To work?" Then slowly, reluctantly, he forced himself back to reality. "Ah yes, to work. Of course, you have to get to work."

"I certainly do."

"Where do you work, Miss Darlington?"

"Me? Well," and now she hesitated a moment, looking at Mr Botibol. "As a matter of fact I work at the old Academy."

"I hope it is pleasant work," he said. "What Academy is that?"

"I teach the piano."

Mr Botibol jumped as though someone had stuck him from behind with a hatpin. His mouth opened very wide.

"It's quite all right," she said, smiling. "I've always wanted to be Horowitz. And could I, do you think, could I please be Schnabel tomorrow?"

Vengeance is Mine Inc.

IT was snowing when I woke up.

I could tell that it was snowing because there was a kind of brightness in the room and it was quiet outside with no footstep-noises coming up from the street and no tyre-noises but only the engines of the cars. I looked up and I saw George over by the window in his green dressing-gown, bending over the paraffin-stove, making the coffee.

"Snowing," I said.

"It's cold," George answered. "It's really cold."

I got out of bed and fetched the morning paper from outside the door. It was cold all right and I ran back quickly and jumped into bed and lay still for a while under the bedclothes, holding my hands tight between my legs fo

r warmth.

"No letters?" George said.

"No. No letters."

"Doesn't look as if the old man's going to cough up."

"Maybe he thinks four hundred and fifty is enough for one month," I said.

"He's never been to New York. He doesn't know the cost of living here."

"You shouldn't have spent it all in one week."

George stood up and looked at me. "We shouldn't have spent it, you mean ."

"That's right," I said. "We." I began reading the paper.

The coffee was ready now and George brought the pot over and put it on the table between our beds. "A person can't live without money," he said. "The old man ought to know that." He got back into his bed without taking off his green dressing-gown. I went on reading. I finished the racing page and the football page and then I started on Lionel Pantaloon, the great political and society columnist. I always read Pantaloon--same as the other twenty or thirty million other people in the country. He's a habit with me; he's more than a habit; he's part of my morning, like three cups of coffee, or shaving.

"This fellow's got a nerve," I said.

"Who?"

"This Lionel Pantaloon."

"What's he saying now?"

"Same sort of thing he's always saying. Same sort of scandal. Always about the rich. Listen to this: '... seen at the Penguin Club... banker William S. Womberg with beautiful starlet Theresa Williams... three nights running... Mrs Womberg at home with a headache... which is something anyone's wife would have if hubby was out squiring Miss Williams of an evening..."

"That fixes Womberg," George said.

"I think it's a shame," I said. "That sort of thing could cause a divorce. How can this Pantaloon get away with stuff like that?"

"He always does, they're all scared of him. But if I was William S. Womberg," George said, "you know what I'd do? I'd go right out and punch this Lionel Pantaloon right on the nose. Why, that's the only way to handle those guys."

"Mr Womberg couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because he's an old man," I said. "Mr Womberg is a dignified and respectable old man. He's a very prominent banker in the town. He couldn't possibly..."

And then it happened. Suddenly, from nowhere, the idea came. It came to me in the middle of what I was saying to George and I stopped short and I

could feel the idea itself kind of flowing into my brain and I kept very quiet and let it come and it kept on coming and almost before I knew what had happened I had it all, the whole plan, the whole brilliant magnificent plan worked out clearly in my head; and right then I knew it was a beauty.

I turned and I saw George staring at me with a look of wonder on his face. "What's wrong?" he said. "What's the matter?"

I kept quite calm. I reached out and got myself some more coffee before I allowed myself to speak.

"George," I said, and I still kept calm. "I have an idea. Now listen very carefully because I have an idea which will make us both very rich. We are broke, are we not?"

"We are."

"And this William S. Womberg," I said, "would you consider that he is angry with Lionel Pantaloon this morning?"

"Angry!" George shouted. "Angry! Why, he'll be madder than hell!"

"Quite so. And do you think that he would like to see Lionel Pantaloon receive a good hard punch on the nose?"

"Damn right he would!"

"And now tell me, is it not possible that Mr Womberg would be prepared to pay a sum of money to someone who would undertake to perform this nose-punching operation efficiently and discreetly on his behalf?"

George turned and looked at me, and gently, carefully, he put down his coffee-cup on the table. A slowly widening smile began to spread across his face. "I get you," he said. "I get the idea."

"That's just a little part of the idea. If you read Pantaloon's column here you will see that there is another person who has been insulted today." I picked up the paper. "There is a Mrs Ella Gimple, a prominent socialite who has perhaps a million dollars in the bank..

"What does Pantaloon say about her?"

I looked at the paper again. "He hints," I answered, "at how she makes a stack of money out of her own friends by throwing roulette parties and acting as the bank."

"That fixes Gimple," George said. "And Womberg. Gimple and Womberg." He was sitting up straight in bed waiting for me to go on.

"Now," I said, "we have two different people both loathing Lionel Pantaloon's guts this morning, both wanting desperately to go out and punch him on the nose, and neither of them daring to do it. You understand that?"

"Absolutely."

"So much then," I said, "for Lionel Pantaloon. But don't forget that there are others like him. There are dozens of other columnists who spend their time insulting wealthy and important people. There's Harry Weyman, Claude Taylor, Jacob Swinski, Walter Kennedy, and the rest of them."

"That's right," George said. "That's absolutely right."

"I'm telling you, there's nothing that makes the rich so furious as being mocked and insulted in the newspapers."

"Go on," George said. "Go on."

"All right. Now this is the plan." I was getting rather excited myself. I was leaning over the side of the bed, resting one hand on the little table, waving the other about in the air as I spoke. "We will set up immediately an organization and we will call it... what shall we call it we will call it... let me see... we will call it 'Vengeance Is Mine Inc.'... How about that?"

"Peculiar name."

"It's biblical. It's good. I like it. 'Vengeance Is Mine Inc.' It sounds fine. And we will have little cards printed which we will send to all our clients reminding them that they have been insulted and mortified in public and offering to punish the offender in consideration of a sum of money. We will buy all the newspapers and read all the columnists and every day we will send out a dozen or more of our cards to prospective clients."

"It's marvellous!" George shouted. "It's terrific!"

"We shall be rich," I told him. "We shall be exceedingly wealthy in no time at all."

"We must start at once!"

I jumped out of bed, fetched a writing-pad and a pencil and ran back to bed again. "Now," I said, pulling my knees under the blankets and propping the writing-pad against them, "the first thing is to decide what we're going to say on the printed cards which we'll be sending to our clients," and I wrote, 'VENGEANCE IS MINE INC.' as a heading on the top of the sheet of paper. Then, with much care, I composed a finely phrased letter explaining the functions of the organization. It finished up with the following sentence: 'Therefore VENGEANCE IS MINE INC. will undertake, on your behalf and in absolute confidence, to administer suitable punishment to columnist and in this regard we respectfully submit to you a choice of methods (together with prices) for your consideration.'

"What do you mean, 'a choice of methods'?" George said.

"We must give them a choice. We must think up a number of things... a number of different punishments. Number one will be... " and I wrote down, '1. Punch him on the nose, once, hard.' "What shall we charge for that?"

"Five hundred dollars," George said instantly.

I wrote it down. "What's the next one?"

"Black his eye," George said.

I wrote it down, '2. Black his eye... \$500.'

"No!" George said. "I disagree with the price. It definitely requires more skill and timing to black an eye nicely than to punch a nose. It is a skilled job. It should be six hundred."

"OK," I said. "Six hundred. And what's the next one?"

"Both together, of course. The old one two." We were in George's territory now. This was right up his street.

"Both together?"

"Absolutely. Punch his nose and black his eye. Eleven hundred dollars."

"There should be a reduction for taking the two," I said. "We'll make it a thousand."

"It's dirt cheap," George said. "They'll snap it up."

"What's next?"

We were both silent now, concentrating fiercely. Three deep parallel grooves of skin appeared upon George's rather low sloping forehead. He began to scratch his scalp, slowly but very strongly. I looked away and tried to think of all the terrible things which people had done to other people. Finally, I got one, and with George watching the point of my pencil moving over the paper, I wrote: '4. Put a rattlesnake (with venom extracted) on the floor of his car, by the pedals, when he parks it.'

"Jesus Christ!" George whispered. "You want to kill him with fright!"

"Sure," I said.

"And where'd you get a rattlesnake, anyway?"

"Buy it. You can always buy them. How much shall we charge for that one?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars," George said firmly. I wrote it down.

"Now we need one more."

"Here it is," George said. "Kidnap him in a car, take all his clothes away except his underpants and his shoes and socks, then dump him out on Fifth Avenue in the rush hour." He smiled, a broad triumphant smile.

"We can't do that."

"Write it down. And charge two thousand five hundred bucks. You'd do it all right if old Womberg were to offer you that much."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose I would." And I wrote it down. "That's enough now," I added. "That gives them a wide choice."

"And where will we get the cards printed?" George asked.

"George Karnoffsky," I said. "Another George. He's a friend of mine. Runs a small printing shop down on Third Avenue. Does wedding invitations and things like that for all the big stores. He'll do it. I know he will."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

We both leapt out of bed and began to dress. "It's twelve o'clock," I said.

"If we hurry we'll catch him before he goes to lunch."

It was still snowing when we went out into the street and the snow was four or five inches thick on the sidewalk, but we covered the fourteen blocks to Karnoffsky's shop at a tremendous pace and we arrived there just as he was putting his coat on to go out. "Claude!" he shouted. "Hi boy! How you

been keeping," and he pumped my hand. He had a fat friendly face and a terrible nose with great wide-open nose-wings which overlapped his cheeks by at least an inch on either side. I greeted him and told him that we had come to discuss some most urgent business. He took off his coat and led us back into the office, then I began to tell him our plans and what we wanted him to do.

When I'd got about quarter way through my story, he started to roar with laughter and it was impossible for me to continue; so I cut it short and handed him the piece of paper with the stuff on it that we wanted him to print. And now, as he read it, his whole body began to shake with laughter and he kept slapping the desk with his hand and coughing and choking and roaring like someone crazy. We sat watching him. We didn't see anything particular to laugh about.

Finally he quietened down and he took out a handkerchief and made a great business about wiping his eyes. "Never laughed so much," he said weakly. "That's a great joke, that is. It's worth a lunch. Come on out and I'll give you lunch."

"Look," I said severely, "this isn't any joke. There is nothing to laugh at. You are witnessing the birth of a new and powerful organization..."

"Come on," he said and he began to laugh again. "Come on and have lunch."

"When can you get those cards printed?" I said. My voice was stern and businesslike. He paused and stared at us. "You mean... you really mean... you're serious about this thing?"

"Absolutely. You are witnessing the birth..."

"All right," he said, "all right," he stood up. "I think you're crazy and you'll get in trouble. Those boys like messing other people about, but they don't much fancy being messed about themselves."

"When can you get them printed, and without any of your workers reading them?"

"For this," he answered gravely, "I will give up my lunch. I will set the type myself. It is the least I can do." He laughed again and the rims of his huge nostrils twitched with pleasure. "How many do you want?"

"A thousand--to start with, and envelopes."

"Come back at two o'clock," he said and I thanked him very much and as we went out we could hear his laughter rumbling down the passage into the back of the shop.

At exactly two o'clock we were back. George Karnoffsky was in his office and the first thing I saw as we went in was the high stack of printed cards on his desk in front of him. They were large cards, about twice the size of ordinary wedding or cocktail invitation-cards. "There you are," he said. "All ready for you." The fool was still laughing.

He handed us each a card and I examined mine carefully. It was a beautiful thing. He had obviously taken much trouble over it. The card itself was thick and stiff with narrow gold edging all the way around, and the letters of the heading were exceedingly elegant. I cannot reproduce it here in all its splendour, but I can at least show you how it read: VENGEANCE IS MINE INC.

Dear.....

You have probably seen columnist 's slanderous and unprovoked attack upon your character in today's paper. It is an outrageous insinuation, a deliberate distortion of the truth.

Are you yourself prepared to allow this miserable malice-monger to insult you in this manner?

The whole world knows that it is foreign to the nature of the American people to permit themselves to be insulted either in public or in private without rising up in righteous indignation and demanding--nay, exacting--a just measure of retribution.

On the other hand, it is only natural that a citizen of your standing and reputation will not wish personally to become further involved in this sordid petty affair, or indeed to have any direct contact whatsoever with this vile person.

How then are you to obtain satisfaction?

The answer is simple, VENGEANCE IS MINE

INC. Will obtain it for you. We will undertake, on your behalf and in absolute confidence, to administer individual punishment to columnist, and in this regard we respectfully submit to you a choice of methods (together with prices) for your consideration: 1. Punch him on the nose, once, hard \$500 2. Black his eye \$600 3. Punch him on the nose and black his eye \$1000 4. Introduce a rattlesnake (with venom extracted) into his car, on the floor by his pedals, when he parks it \$1500 5. Kidnap him, take all his clothes away except his underpants, his shoes and socks, then dump him out on Fifth Avenue in the rush hour \$2500 This work executed by a professional.

If you desire to avail yourself of any of these offers, kindly reply to VENGEANCE IS MINE INC. at the address indicated upon the enclosed slip of paper. If it is practicable, you will be notified in advance of the place where the action will occur and of the time, so that you may, if you wish, watch the proceedings in person from a safe and anonymous distance.

No payment need be made until after your order has been satisfactorily executed, when an account will be rendered in the usual manner.

George Karnoffsky had done a beautiful job of printing.

"Claude," he said, "you like?"

"It's marvellous."

"It's the best I could do for you. It's like in the war when I would see soldiers going off perhaps to get killed and all the time I would want to be giving them things and doing things for them." He was beginning to laugh again, so I said, "We'd better be going now. Have you got large envelopes for these cards?"

"Everything is here. And you can pay me when the money starts coming in." That seemed to set him off worse than ever and he collapsed into his chair, giggling like a fool. George and I hurried out of the shop into the street, into the cold snow-falling afternoon.

We almost ran the distance back to our room and on the way up I borrowed a Manhattan telephone directory from the public telephone in the hall. We found 'Womberg, William S,' without any trouble and while I read out the address--somewhere up in the East Nineties--George wrote it on one of the envelopes.

'Gimple, Mrs Ella H,' was also in the book and we addressed an envelope to her as well. "We'll just send to Womberg and Gimple today," I said. "We haven't really got started yet. Tomorrow we'll send a dozen."

"We'd better catch the next post," George said.

"We'll deliver them by hand," I said. "Now, at once. The sooner they get them the better. Tomorrow might be too late. They won't be half so angry tomorrow as they are today. People are apt to cool off through the night. See here," I said, "you go ahead and deliver those two cards right away. While you're doing that I'm going to snoop around the town and try to find out something about the habits of Lionel Pantaloon. See you back here later in the evening... At about nine o'clock that evening I returned and found George lying on his bed smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee.

"I delivered them both; he said. "Just slipped them through the letter-boxes and rang the bells and beat it up the street. Womberg had a huge house, a huge white house. How did you get on?"

"I went to see a man I know who works in the sports section of the Daily Mirror. He told me all."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said Pantaloon's movements are more or less routine. He operates at night, but wherever he goes earlier in the evening, he always--and this is the important point--he always finishes up at the Penguin Club. He gets there round about midnight and stays until two or two-thirty. That's when his legmen bring him all the dope."

"That's all we want to know," George said happily.

"It's too easy."

"Money for old rope."

There was a full bottle of blended whisky in the cupboard and George fetched it out. For the next two hours we sat upon our beds drinking the whisky and making wonderful and complicated plans for the development of our organization. By eleven o'clock we were employing a staff of fifty, including twelve famous pugilists, and our offices were in Rockefeller Center. Towards midnight we had obtained control over all columnists and were dictating their daily columns to them by telephone from our headquarters, taking care to insult and infuriate at least twenty rich persons in one part of the country or another every day. We were immensely wealthy and George had a British Bentley, I had five Cadillacs. George kept practising telephone talks with Lionel Pantaloon. "That you, Pantaloon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, listen here. I think your column stinks today. It's lousy."

"I'm very sorry, sir. I'll try to do better tomorrow."

"Damn right you'll do better, Pantaloon. Matter of fact we've been thinking about getting someone else to take over."

"But please, please sir, just give me another chance."

"OK, Pantaloon, but this is the last. And by the way, the boys are putting a rattlesnake in your car tonight, on behalf of Mr Hiram C. King, the soap manufacturer. Mr King will be watching from across the street so don't forget to act scared when you see it."

"Yes, sir, of course, sir. I won't forget, sir.."

When we finally went to bed and the light was out, I could still hear George giving hell to Pantaloon on the telephone.

The next morning we were both woken up by the church clock on the corner striking nine. George got up and went to the door to get the papers and when he came back he was holding a letter in his hand.

"Open it!" I said.

He opened it and carefully unfolded a single sheet of thin notepaper.

"Read it!" I shouted.

He began to read it aloud, his voice low and serious at first but rising gradually to a high, almost hysterical shout of triumph as the full meaning of the letter was revealed to him. It said: 'Your methods appear curiously unorthodox. At the same time anything you do to that scoundrel has my approval. So go ahead. Start with Item 1, and if you are successful IT be only too glad to give you an order to work right on through the list. Send the bill to me. William S. Womberg.'

I recollect that in the excitement of the moment we did a kind of dance around the room in our pyjamas, praising Mr Womberg in loud voices and shouting that we were rich. George turned somersaults on his bed and it is possible that I did the same.

"When shall we do it?" he said. "Tonight?"

I paused before replying. I refused to be rushed. The pages of history are filled with the names of great men who have come to grief by permitting themselves to make hasty decisions in the excitement of a moment. I put on my dressing-gown, lit a cigarette and began to pace up and down the room. "There is no hurry," I said. "Womberg's order can be dealt with in due course. But first of all we must send out today's cards."

I dressed quickly, we went out to the newsstand across the street, bought one copy of every daily paper there was and returned to our room. The next two hours was spent in reading the columnists' columns, and in the end we had a list of eleven people--eight men and three women--all of whom had been insulted in one way or another by one of the columnists that morning. Things were going well. We were working smoothly. It took us only another half hour to look up the addresses of the insulted ones--two we couldn't find--and to address the envelopes.

In the afternoon we delivered them, and at about six in the evening we got back to our room, tired but triumphant. We made coffee and we fried hamburgers and we had supper in bed. Then we re-read Womberg's letter aloud to each other many many times.

"What's he doing he's giving us an order for six thousand one hundred dollars," George said. "Items 1 to 5 inclusive."

"It's not a bad beginning. Not bad for the first day. Six thousand a day works out at... let me see... it's nearly two million dollars a year, not counting Sundays. A million each. It's more than Betty Grable."

"We are very wealthy people," George said. He smiled, a slow and wondrous smile of pure contentment.

"In a day or two we will move to a suite of rooms at the St Regis."

"I think the Waldorf," George said.

"All right, the Waldorf. And later on we might as well take a house."

"One like Womberg's?"

"All right. One like Womberg's. But first," I said, "we have work to do. Tomorrow we shall deal with Pantaloon. We will catch him as he comes out of the Penguin Club. At two-thirty a. m. we will be waiting for him, and when he comes out into the street you will step forward and punch him once, hard, right upon the point of the nose as per contract."

"It will be a pleasure," George said. "It will be a real pleasure. But how do we get away? Do we run?"

"We shall hire a car for an hour. We have just enough money left for that, and I shall be sitting at the wheel with the engine running, not ten yards away, and the door will be open and when you've punched him you'll just jump back into the car and we'll be gone."

"It is perfect. I shall punch him very hard." George paused. He clenched

his right fist and examined his knuckles. Then he smiled again and he said slowly, "This nose of his, is it not possible that it will afterwards be so much blunted that it will no longer poke well into other people's business?"

"It is quite possible," I answered, and with that happy thought in our minds we switched out the lights and went early to sleep.

The next morning I was woken by a shout and I sat up and saw George standing at the foot of my bed in his pyjamas, waving his arms. "Look!" he shouted, "there are four! There are four!" I looked, and indeed there were four letters in his hand.

"Open them. Quickly, open them."

The first one he read aloud: "Dear Vengeance Is Mine Inc., That's the best proposition I've had in years. Go right ahead and give Mr Jacob Swinski the rattlesnake treatment (Item 4). But I'll be glad to pay double if you'll forget to extract the poison from its fangs. Yours Gertrude Porter Van dervelt. PS You'd better insure the snake. That guy's bite carries more poison than the rattler's."

George read the second one aloud: "My cheque for \$500 is made out and lies before me on my desk. The moment I receive proof that you have punched Lionel Pantaloon hard on the nose, it will be posted to you, I should prefer a fracture, if possible. Yours etc. Wilbur H. Gollogly."

George read the third one aloud: "In my present frame of mind and against my better judgement, I am tempted to reply to your card and to request that you deposit that scoundrel Walter Kennedy upon Fifth Avenue dressed only in his underwear. I make the proviso that there shall be snow on the ground at the time and that the temperature shall be sub-zero. H. Gresham."

The fourth one he also read aloud: "A good hard sock on the nose for Pantaloon is worth five hundred of mine or anybody else's money. I should like to watch. Yours sincerely, Claudia Calthorpe Hines."

George laid the letters down gently, carefully upon the bed. For a while there was silence. We stared at each other, too astonished, too happy to speak. I began to calculate the value of those four orders in terms of money.

"That's five thousand dollars worth," I said softly.

Upon George's face there was a huge bright grin. "Claude," he said, "should we not move now to the Waldorf?"

"Soon," I answered, "but at the moment we have no time for moving. We have not even time to send out fresh cards today. We must start to execute the orders we have in hand. We are overwhelmed with work."

"Should we not engage extra staff and enlarge our organization?"

"Later," I said. "Even for that there is no time today. Just think what we have to do. We have to put a rattlesnake in Jacob Swinski's car... we have to dump Walter Kennedy on Fifth Avenue in his underpants... we have to punch Pantaloon on the nose... let me see... yes, for three different people we have

me to punch Pantaloon. ¥ I stopped. I closed my eyes. I sat still. Again I became conscious of a small clear stream of inspiration flowing into the tissues of my brain. "I have it!" I shouted. "I have it! I have it! Three birds with one stone! Three customers with one punch!"

"How?"

"Don't you see? We only need to punch Pantaloon once and each of the three customers... Womberg, Gollogly and Claudia Hines... will think it's being done specially for him or her."

"Say it again." I said it again.

"It's brilliant."

"It's common-sense. And the same principle will apply to the others. The rattlesnake treatment and the others can wait until we have more orders. Perhaps in a few days we will have ten orders for rattlesnakes in Swinski's car. Then we will do them all in one go."

"It's wonderful."

"This evening then," I said, "we will handle Pantaloon. But first we must hire a car. Also we must send telegrams, one to Womberg, one to Gollogly and one to Claudia Hines, telling them where and when the punching will take place."

We dressed rapidly and went out.

In a dirty silent little garage down on East 9th Street we managed to hire a car, a 1934 Chevrolet, eight dollars for the evening. We then sent three telegrams, each one identical and cunningly worded to conceal its true meaning from inquisitive people: 'Hope to see you outside Penguin Club two-thirty a.m. Regards V. I. Mine.'

"There is one thing more," I said. "It is essential that you should be disguised. Pantaloon, or the doorman, for example, must not be able to identify you afterwards. You must wear a false moustache."

"What about you?"

"Not necessary. I'll be sitting in the car. They won't see me."

We went to a children's toy-shop and we bought for George a magnificent black moustache, a thing with long pointed ends, waxed and stiff and shining, and when he held it up against his face he looked exactly like the Kaiser of Germany. The man in the shop also sold us a tube of glue and he showed us how the moustache should be attached to the upper lip. "Going to have fun with the kids?" he asked, and George said, "Absolutely."

All was now ready, but there was a long time to wait. We had three dollars left between us and with this we bought a sandwich each and went to a movie. Then, at eleven o'clock that evening, we collected our car and in it we began to cruise slowly through the streets of New York waiting for the time to pass.

"You'd better put on your moustache so as you get used to it."

We pulled up under a street lamp and I squeezed some glue on to George's upper lip and fixed on the huge black hairy thing with its pointed ends. Then we drove on. It was cold in the car and outside it was beginning to snow again. I could see a few small snowflakes falling through the beams of the car-lights. George kept saying, "How hard shall I hit him?" and I kept answering, "Hit him as hard as you can, and on the nose. It must be on the nose because that is a part of the contract. Everything must be done right. Our clients may be watching."

At two in the morning we drove slowly past the entrance to the Penguin Club in order to survey the situation. "I will park there," I said, "just past the entrance in that patch of dark. But I will leave the door open for you."

We drove on. Then George said, "What does he look like? How do I know it's him?"

"Don't worry," I answered. "I've thought of that," and I took from my pocket a piece of paper and handed it to him. "You take this and fold it up small and give it to the doorman and tell him to see it gets to Pantaloon quickly. Act as though you are scared to death and in an awful hurry. It's a hundred to one that Pantaloon will come out. No columnist could resist that message."

On the paper I had written: 'I am a worker in Soviet Consulate. Come to the door very quickly please I have something to tell but come quickly as I am in danger, I cannot come in to you.'

"You see," I said, "your moustache will make you look like a Russian. All Russians have big moustaches."

George took the paper and folded it up very small and held it in his fingers. It was nearly half past two in the morning now and we began to drive towards the Penguin Club.

"You all set?" I said.

"Yes."

"We're going in now. Here we come. I'll park just past the entrance... here. Hit him hard," I said, and George opened the door and got out of the car. I closed the door behind him but I leant over and kept my hand on the handle so I could open it again quick, and I let down the window so I could watch. I kept the engine ticking over.

I saw George walk swiftly up to the doorman who stood under the red and white canopy which stretched out over the sidewalk. I saw the doorman turn and look down at George and I didn't like the way he did it. He was a tall proud man dressed in a magenta-coloured uniform with gold buttons and gold shoulders and a broad white stripe down each magenta trouser-leg. Also he wore white gloves and he stood there looking proudly down at George, frowning, pressing his lips together hard. He was looking at George's moustache and I thought Oh my God we have overdone it. We have over-disguised him. He'

s going to know it's false and he's going to take one of the long pointed ends in his fingers and he'll give it a tweak and it'll come off. But he didn't. He was distracted by George's acting, for George was acting well. I could see him hopping about, clasping and unclasping his hands, swaying his body and shaking his head, and I could hear him saying, "Plees plees plees you must hurry. It is life and teth. Plees plees take it kvick to Mr Pantaloon." His Russian accent was not like any accent I had heard before, but all the same there was a quality of real despair in his voice.

Finally, gravely, proudly, the doorman said, "Give me the note." George gave it to him and said, "Tank you, tank you, but say it is urgent," and the doorman disappeared inside. In a few moments he returned and said, "It's being delivered now." George paced nervously up and down. I waited, watching the door. Three or four minutes elapsed. George wrung his hands and said, "Vere is he? Vere is he? Plees to go and see if he is not coming!"

"What's the matter with you?" the doorman said. Now he was looking at George's moustache again.

"It is life and teth! Mr Pantaloon can help! He must come!"

"Why don't you shut up," the doorman said, but he opened the door again and he poked his head inside and I heard him saying something to someone

To George he said, "They say he's coming now.", A moment later the door opened and Pantaloon himself, small and dapper, stepped out. He paused by the door, looking quickly from side to side like an inquisitive ferret. The doorman touched his cap and pointed at George. I heard Pantaloon say, "Yes, what did you want?"

George said, "plees, dis vay a leetle so as novone can hear," and he led Pantaloon along the pavement, away from the doorman and towards the car.

"Come on, now," Pantaloon said. "What is it you want?"

Suddenly George shouted "Look!" and he pointed up the street. Pantaloon turned his head and as he did so George swung his right arm and he hit Pantaloon plumb on the point of the nose. I saw George leaning forward on the punch, all his weight behind it, and the whole of Pantaloon appeared somehow to lift slightly off the ground and to float backwards for two or three feet until the facade of the Penguin Club stopped him. All this happened very quickly, and then George was in the car beside me and we were off and I could hear the doorman blowing a whistle behind us.

"We've done it!" George gasped. He was excited and out of breath. "I hit him good! Did you see how good I hit him!"

It was snowing hard now and I drove fast and made many sudden turnings and I knew no one would catch us in this snowstorm.

"Son of a bitch almost went through the wall I hit him so hard."

"Well done, George," I said. "Nice work, George."

"And did you see him lift? Did you see him lift right up off the ground?"

"Womberg will be pleased," I said.

"And Gollogly, and the Hines woman."

"They'll all be pleased," I said. "Watch the money coming in."

"There's a car behind us!" George shouted. "It's following us! It's right on our tail! Drive like mad!"

"Impossible," I said. "They couldn't have picked us up already. It's just another car going somewhere." I turned sharply to the right.

"He's still with us," George said. "Keep turning. We'll lose him soon."

"How the hell can we lose a police-car in a nineteen thirty-four Chev," I said. "I'm going to stop."

"Keep going!" George shouted. "You're doing fine."

"I'm going to stop," I said. "It'll only make them mad if we go on."

George protested fiercely but I knew it was no good and I pulled in to the side of the road. The other car swerved out and went past us and skidded to a standstill in front of us.

"Quick," George said. "Let's beat it." He had the door open and he was ready to run.

"Don't be a fool," I said. "Stay where you are. You can't get away now."

A voice from outside said, "All right boys, what's the hurry?"

"No hurry," I answered. "We're just going home."

"Yea?"

"Oh yes, we're just on our way home now."

The man poked his head in through the window on my side, and he looked at me, then at George, then at me again.

"It's a nasty night," George said. "We're just trying to reach home before the streets get all snowed up."

"Well," the man said, "you can take it easy. I just thought I'd like to give you this right away." He dropped a wad of banknotes on to my lap. "I'm Gollogly," he added, "Wilbur H. Gollogly," and he stood out there in the snow grinning at us, stamping his feet and rubbing his hands to keep them warm. "I got your wire and I watched the whole thing from across the street.

You did a fine job. I'm paying you boys double. It was worth it. Funniest thing I ever seen. Goodbye boys. Watch your steps. They'll be after you now. Get out of town if I were you. Goodbye." And before we could say anything, he was gone.

When finally we got back to our room I started packing at once.

"You crazy?" George said. "We've only got to wait a few hours and we receive five hundred dollars each from Womberg and the Hines woman. Then we'll have two thousand altogether and we can go anywhere we want."

So we spent the next day waiting in our room and reading the papers, one of which had a whole column on the front page headed, 'Brutal assault on

famous columnist'. But sure enough the late afternoon post brought us two letters and there was five hundred dollars in each.

And right now, at this moment, we are sitting in a Pullman car, drinking Scotch whisky and heading south for a place where there is always sunshine and where the horses are running every day. We are immensely wealthy and George keeps saying that if we put the whole of our two thousand dollars on a horse at ten to one we shall make another twenty thousand and we will be able to retire. 'We will have a house at Palm Beach,' he says, 'and we will entertain upon a lavish scale. Beautiful socialites will loiter around the edge of our swimming pool sipping cool drinks, and after a while we will perhaps put another large sum of money upon another horse and we shall become wealthier still. Possibly we will become tired of Palm Beach and then we will move around in a leisurely manner among the playgrounds of the rich. Monte Carlo and places like that. Like the Au Khan and the Duke of Windsor. We will become prominent members of the international set and film stars will smile at us and head-waiters will bow to us and perhaps, in time to come, perhaps we might even get ourselves mentioned in Lionel Pantalon's column.'

"That would be something," I said.

"Wouldn't it just," he answered happily. "Wouldn't that just be something."

The Butler

As soon as George Cleaver had made his first million, he and Mrs Cleaver moved out of their small suburban villa into an elegant London house. They acquired a French chef called Monsieur Estragon and an English butler called Tibbs, both wildly expensive. With the help of these two experts, the Cleavers set out to climb the social ladder and began to give dinner parties several times a week on a lavish scale.

But these dinners never seemed quite to come off. There was no animation, no spark to set the conversation alight, no style at all. Yet the food was superb and the service faultless.

"What the heck's wrong with our parties, Tibbs?" Mr Cleaver said to the butler. "Why don't nobody never loosen up and let themselves go?"

Tibbs inclined his head to one side and looked at the ceiling. "I hope, sir, you will not be offended if I offer a small suggestion."

"What is it?"

"It's the wine, sir."

"What about the wine?"

"Well, sir, Monsieur Estragon serves superb food. Superb food should be accompanied by superb wine. But you serve them a cheap and very odious Spanish red."

"Then why in heaven's name didn't you say so before, you twit?" cried Mr Cleaver. "I'm not short of money. I'll give them the best flipping wine in the world if that's what they want! What is the best wine in the world?"

"Claret, sir," the butler replied, "from the greatest châteaux in Bordeaux--Lafite, Latour, Haut-Brion, Margaux, Mouton-Rothschild and Cheval Blanc. And from only the very greatest vintage years, which are, in my opinion, 1906, 1914, 1929 and 1945. Cheval Blanc was also magnificent in 1895 and 1921, and Haut-Brion in 1906."

"Buy them all!" said Mr Cleaver. "Fill the flipping cellar from top to bottom!"

"I can try, sir," the butler said. "But wines like these are extremely rare and cost a fortune."

"I don't give a hoot what they cost!" said Mr Cleaver. "Just go out and get them!"

That was easier said than done. Nowhere in England or in France could Tibbs find any wine from 1895, 1906, 1914 or 1921. But he did manage to get hold of some twenty-nines and forty-fives. The bills for these wines were astronomical. They were in fact so huge that even Mr Cleaver began to sit up and take notice. And his interest quickly turned into outright enthusiasm when the butler suggested to him that a knowledge of wine was a very considerable social asset. Mr Cleaver bought books on the subject and read them from cover to cover. He also learned a great deal from Tibbs himself, who taught him, among other things, just how wine should be properly tasted. "First, sir, you sniff it long and deep, with your nose right inside the top of the glass, like this. Then you take a mouthful and you open your lips a tiny bit and suck in air, letting the air bubble through the wine. Watch me do it. Then you roll it vigorously around your mouth. And finally you swallow it."

In due course, Mr Cleaver came to regard himself as an expert on wine, and inevitably he turned into a colossal bore. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he would announce at dinner, holding up his glass, 'this is a Margaux '29! The greatest year of the century! Fantastic bouquet! Smells of cowslips! And notice especially the after taste and how the tiny trace of tannin gives it that glorious astringent quality! Terrific, ain't it?'

The guests would nod and sip and mumble a few praises, but that was all.

"What's the matter with the silly twerps?" Mr Cleaver said to Tibbs after this had gone on for some time. "Don't none of them appreciate a great wine?"

The butler laid his head to one side and gazed upward. "I think they would a

ppreciate it, sir," he said, "if they were able to taste it. But they can't."

"What the heck d'you mean, they can't taste it?"

"I believe, sir, that you have instructed Monsieur Estragon to put liberal quantities of vinegar in the salad-dressing."

"What's wrong with that? I like vinegar."

"Vinegar," the butler said, "is the enemy of wine. It destroys the palate. The dressing should be made of pure olive oil and a little lemon juice. Nothing else."

"Hogwash!" said Mr Cleaver.

"As you wish, sir."

"I'll say it again, Tibbs. You're talking hogwash. The vinegar don't spoil my palate one bit."

"You are very fortunate, sir," the butler murmured, backing out of the room.

That night at dinner, the host began to mock his butler in front of the guests. "Mister Tibbs," he said, "has been trying to tell me I can't taste my wine if I put vinegar in the salad-dressing. Right, Tibbs?"

"Yes, sir," Tibbs replied gravely.

"And I told him hogwash. Didn't I, Tibbs?"

"Yes, sir."

"This wine," Mr Cleaver went on, raising his glass, "tastes to me exactly like a Chateau Lafite '45, and what's more it is a Chateau Lafite '45."

Tibbs, the butler, stood very still and erect near the sideboard, his face pale. "If you'll forgive me, sir," he said, "that is not a Lafite '45."

Mr Cleaver swung round in his chair and stared at the butler. "What the heck d'you mean," he said. "There's the empty bottles beside you to prove it!"

These great clarets, being old and full of sediment, were always decanted by Tibbs before dinner. They were served in cut-glass decanters, while the empty bottles, as is the custom, were placed on the sideboard. Right now, two empty bottles of Lafite '45 were standing on the sideboard for all to see.

"The wine you are drinking, sir," the butler said quietly, "happens to be that cheap and rather odious Spanish red."

Mr Cleaver looked at the wine in his glass, then at the butler. The blood was coming to his face now, his skin was turning scarlet. "You're lying, Tibbs!" he said.

"No sir, I'm not lying," the butler said. "As a matter of fact, I have never served you any other wine but Spanish red since I've been here. It seemed to suit you very well."

"I don't believe him!" Mr Cleaver cried out to his guests. "The man's gone mad."

"Great wines," the butler said, "should be treated with reverence. It is

bad enough to destroy the palate with three or four cocktails before dinner, as you people do, but when you slosh vinegar over your food into the bargain, then you might just as well be drinking dishwater."

Ten outraged faces around the table stared at the butler. He had caught them off balance. They were speechless.

"This," the butler said, reaching out and touching one of the empty bottles lovingly with his fingers, "this is the last of the forty-fives. The twenty-nines have already been finished. But they were glorious wines. Monsieur Estragon and I enjoyed them immensely."

The butler bowed and walked quite slowly from the room. He crossed the hail and went out of the front door of the house into the street where Monsieur Estragon was already loading their suitcases into the boot of the small car which they owned together.

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life

MY cow started bulling at dawn and the noise can drive you crazy if the cow shed is right under your window. So I got dressed early and phoned Claud at the filling-station to ask if he'd give me a hand to lead her down the steep hill and across the road over to Rummins's farm to have her serviced by Rummins's famous bull.

Claud arrived five minutes later and we tied a rope around the cow's neck and set off down the lane on this cool September morning. There were high hedges on either side of the lane and the hazel bushes had clusters of big ripe nuts all over them.

"You ever seen Rummins do a mating?" Claud asked me.

I told him I had never seen anyone do an official mating between a bull and a cow.

"Rummins does it special," Claud said. "There's nobody in the world does a mating the way Rummins does it."

"What's so special about it?"

"You got a treat coming to you," Claud said.

"So has the cow," I said.

"If the rest of the world knew about what Rummins does at a mating," Claud said, "he'd be world famous. It would change the whole science of dairy-farming all over the world."

"Why doesn't he tell them then?" I asked.

"I doubt he's ever even thought about it," Claud said. "Rummins isn't one to bother his head about things like that. He's got the best dairy-herd for miles around and that's all he cares about. He doesn't want the newspapers sw

arming all over his place asking questions, which is exactly what would happen if it ever got out."

"Why don't you tell me about it," I said.

We walked on in silence for a while, the cow pulling ahead.

"I'm surprised Rummins said yes to lending you his bull," Claud said. "I've never known him do that before."

At the bottom of the lane we crossed the Aylesbury road and climbed up the hill on the other side of the valley towards the farm. The cow knew there was a bull up there somewhere and she was pulling harder than ever on the rope. We had to trot to keep up with her.

There were no gates at the farm entrance, just a wide gap and a cobbled yard beyond. Rummins, carrying a pail of milk across the yard, saw us coming. He set the pail down slowly and came over to meet us. "She's ready then, is she?" he said.

"Been yelling her head off," I said.

Rummins walked around my cow, examining her carefully. He was a short man, built squat and broad like a frog. He had a wide frog mouth and broken teeth and shifty eyes, but over the years I had grown to respect him for his wisdom and the sharpness of his mind. "All right then," he said. "What is it you want, a heifer calf or a bull?"

"Can I choose?"

"Of course you can choose."

"Then I'll have a heifer," I said, keeping a straight face. "We want milk not beef."

"Hey, Bert!" Rummins called out. "Come and give us a hand!"

Bert emerged from the cowsheds. He was Rummins's youngest son, a tall boneless boy with a runny nose and something wrong with one eye. The eye was pale and misty-grey all over, like a boiled fish eye, and it moved quite independently from the other eye. "Get another rope," Rummins said.

Bert fetched a rope and looped it around my cow's neck so that she now had two ropes holding her, my own and Bert's. "He wants a heifer," Rummins said. "Face her into the sun."

"Into the sun?" I said. "There isn't any sun."

"There's always sun," Rummins said. "Them bloody clouds don't make no difference. Come on now. Get a jerk on, Bert. Bring her round. Sun's over there."

With Bert holding one rope and Claud and me holding the other, we manoeuvred the cow round until her head was facing directly towards the place in the sky where the sun was hidden behind the clouds.

"I told you it was different," Claud whispered. "You're going to see something soon you've never seen in your life before."

"Hold her steady now!" Rummins ordered. "Don't let her jump round!" Then

he hurried over to a shed in the far corner of the yard and brought out the bull. He was an enormous beast, a black-and-white Friesian, with short legs and a body like a ten-ton truck. Rummins was leading it by a chain attached to a steel ring through the bull's nose.

"Look at them bangers on him," Claud said. "I'll bet you've never seen a bull with bangers like that before."

"Tremendous," I said. They were like a couple of cantaloupe melons in a carrier bag and they were almost dragging on the ground as the bull waddled forward.

"You better stand back and leave the rope to me," Claud said. "You get right out of the way." I was happy to comply.

The bull approached my cow slowly, staring at her with dangerous white eyes. Then he started snorting and pawing the ground with one foreleg.

"Hang on tight!" Rummins shouted to Bert and Claud. They were leaning back against their respective ropes, holding them very taut and at right angles to the cow.

"Come on, boy," Rummins whispered softly to the bull. "Go to it, lad."

With surprising agility the bull heaved his front part up on to the cow's back and I caught a glimpse of a long scarlet penis, as thin as a rapier and just as stiff, and then it was inside the cow and the cow staggered and the bull heaved and snorted and in thirty seconds it was all over. The bull climbed down again slowly and stood there looking somewhat pleased with himself.

"Some bulls don't know where to put it," Rummins said. "But mine does. Mine could thread a needle with that dick of his."

"Wonderful," I said. "A bull's eye."

"That's exactly where the word come from," Rummins said. "A bull's eye. Come on, lad," he said to the bull. "You've had your lot for today." He led the bull back to the shed and shut him in and when he returned I thanked him, and then I asked him if he really believed that facing the cow into the sun during the mating would produce a female calf.

"Don't be so damn silly," he said. "Of course I believe it. Facts is facts."

"What do you mean facts is facts?"

"I mean what I say, mister. It's certainty. That's right, ain't it Bert?"

"And if you face her away from the sun does it get you a male?"

"Every single time," Rummins said. I smiled and he saw it. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Not really," I said.

"Come with me," he said. "And when you see what I'm going to show you, you'll bloody well have to believe me. You two stay here and watch that cow; he said to Claud and Bert. Then he led me into the farmhouse. The room we went into was dark and small and dirty. From a drawer in the sideboard he produced a whole stack of thin exercise books. They were the kind chil

dren use at school. "These is calving books," he announced. "And in here is a record of every mating that's ever been done on this farm since I first started thirty-two years ago."

He opened a book at random and allowed me to look. There were four columns on each page: COW'S NAME, DATE OF MATING, DATE OF BIRTH, SEX OF CALF.

I glanced down the sex column. Heifer, it said. Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer.

"We don't want no bull calves here," Rummins said. "Bull calves is a dead loss on a dairy farm."

I turned over a page. Heifer, it said. Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer.

"Hey," I said, "here's a bull calf."

"That's quite right," Rummins said. "Now take a look at what I wrote opposite that one at the time of the mating." I glanced at column two. Cow jumped round, it said.

"Some of them gets fractious and you can't hold 'em steady," Rummins said. "So they finish up facing the other way. That's the only time I ever get a bull."

"This is fantastic," I said, leafing through the book.

"Of course it's fantastic," Rummins said. "It's one of the most fantastic things in the whole world. Do you actually know what I average on this farm? I average ninety-eight per cent heifers year in year out! Check it for yourself. Go on and check it. I'm not stopping you."

"I'd like very much to check it," I said. "May I sit down?"

"Help yourself," Rummins said. "I've got work to do." I found a pencil and paper and I proceeded to go through each one of the thirty-two little books with great care. There was one book for each year, from 1915 to 1946. There were approximately eighty calves a year born on the farm, and my final results over the thirty-two-year period were as follows: Heifer calves 2,516 Bull calves 56 Total calves born, including stillborn 2,572 I went outside to look for Rummins. Claud had disappeared. He'd probably taken my cow home. I found Rummins in the dairy pouring milk into the separator. "Haven't you ever told anyone about this?" I asked him.

"Never have," he said.

"Why not?"

"I reckon it ain't nobody else's business."

"But my dear man, this could transform the entire milk industry the world over."

"It might," he said. "It might easily do that. It wouldn't do the beef business no harm either if they could get bulls every time."

"How did you hear about it in the first place?"

"My old dad told me," Rummins said. "When I were about eighteen, my old dad said to me, 'I'll tell you a secret,' he said, 'that'll make you rich.' And he told me this."

"Has it made you rich?"

"I ain't done too bad for myself, have I?" he said.

"But did your father offer any sort of explanation as to why it works?" I asked.

Rummins explored the inner rim of one nostril with the end of his thumb, holding the nose flap between thumb and forefinger as he did so. "A very clever man, my old dad was," he said. "Very clever indeed. Of course he told me how it works."

"How?"

"He explained to me that a cow don't have nothing to do with deciding the sex of the calf," Rummins said. "All a cow's got is an egg. It's the bull decides what the sex is going to be. The sperm of the bull."

"Go on," I said.

"According to my old dad, a bull has two different kinds of sperm, female sperm and male sperm. You follow me so far?"

"Yes," I said. "Keep going."

"So when the old bull shoots off his sperm into the cow, a sort of swimming race takes place between the male and the female sperm to see which one can reach the egg first. If the female sperm wins, you get a heifer."

"But what's the sun got to do with it?" I asked.

"I'm coming to that," he said, "so listen carefully. When an animal is standing on all fours like a cow, and when you face her head into the sun, then the sperm has also got to travel directly into the sun to reach the egg. Switch the cow around and they'll be travelling away from the sun."

"So what you're saying," I said, "is that the sun exerts a pull of some sort on the female sperm and makes them swim faster than the male sperm."

"Exactly!" cried Rummins. "That's exactly it! It exerts a pull! It drags them forward! That's why they always win! And if you turn the cow round the other way, it's pulling them backwards and the male sperm wins instead."

"It's an interesting theory," I said. "But it hardly seems likely that the sun, which is millions of miles away, could exert a pull on a bunch of spermatozoa inside a cow."

"You're talking rubbish!" cried Rummins. "Absolute and utter rubbish! Doesn't the moon exert a pull on the bloody tides of the ocean to make 'em high and low? Of course it does! So why shouldn't the sun exert a pull on the female sperm?"

"I see your point."

Suddenly Rummins seemed to have had enough. "You'll have a heifer calf for sure," he said, turning away. "Don't you worry about that."

"Mr Rummins," I said.

"What?"

"Is there any reason why this shouldn't work with humans as well?"

"Of course it'll work with humans," he said. "Just so long as you remember everything's got to be pointed in the right direction. A cow ain't lying down you know. It's standing on all fours."

"I see what you mean."

"And it ain't no good doing it at night either," he said, "because the sun is shielded behind the earth and it can't influence anything."

"That's true," I said, "but have you any sort of proof it works with humans?"

Rummins laid his head to one side and gave me another of his long sly broken-toothed grins. "I've got four boys of my own, ain't I?" he said.

"So you have."

"Ruddy girls ain't no use to me around here," he said. "Boys is what you want on a farm and I've got four of 'em, right?"

"Right," I said, "you're absolutely right."

The Bookseller

IF, in those days, you walked up from Trafalgar Square into Charing Cross Road, you would come in a few minutes to a shop on the right-hand side that had above the window the words WILLIAM BUGGAGE--RARE BOOKS.

If you peered through the window itself you would see that the walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling, and if you then pushed open the door and went in, you would immediately be assailed by that subtle odour of old cardboard and tea leaves that pervades the interiors of every second-hand bookshop in London. Nearly always, you would find two or three customers in there, silent shadowy figures in overcoats and trilby hats rummaging among the sets of Jane Austen and Trollope and Dickens and George Eliot, hoping to find a first edition.

No shop-keeper ever seemed to be hovering around to keep an eye on the customers, and if somebody actually wanted to pay for a book instead of pinching it and walking out, then he or she would have to push through a door at the back of the shop on which it said OFFICE--PAY HERE. If you went into the office you would find both Mr William Buggage and his assistant, Miss Muriel Tottle, seated at their respective desks and very much preoccupied. Mr Buggage would be sitting behind a valuable eighteenth-century mahogany partners-desk, and Miss Tottle, a few feet away, would be using a so

slightly smaller but no less elegant piece of furniture, a Regency writing-table with a top of faded green leather. On Mr Buggage's desk there would invariably be one copy of the day's London Times, as well as The Daily Telegraph, The Manchester Guardian, The Western Mail, and The Glasgow Herald. There would also be a current edition of Who's Who close at hand, fat and red and well thumbed. Miss Tottle's writing-table would have on it an electric typewriter and a plain but very nice open box containing notepaper and envelopes, as well as a quantity of paper-clips and staplers and other secretarial paraphernalia.

Now and again, but not very often, a customer would enter the office from the shop and would hand his chosen volume to Miss Tottle, who checked the price written in pencil on the fly-leaf and accepted the money, giving change when necessary from somewhere in the left-hand drawer of her writing-table. Mr Buggage never bothered even to glance up at those who came in and went out, and if one of them asked a question, it would be Miss Tottle who answered it.

Neither Mr Buggage nor Miss Tottle appeared to be in the least concerned about what went on in the main shop. In point of fact, Mr Buggage took the view that if someone was going to steal a book, then good luck to him. He knew very well that there was not a single valuable first edition out there on the shelves. There might be a moderately rare volume of Galsworthy or an early Waugh that had come in with a job lot bought at auction, and there were certainly some good sets of Boswell and Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson and the rest, often very nicely bound in half or even whole calf. But those were not really the sort of things you could slip into your overcoat pocket. Even if a villain did walk out with half a dozen volumes, Mr Buggage wasn't going to lose any sleep over it. Why should he when he knew that the shop itself earned less money in a whole year than the backroom business grossed in a couple of days. It was what went on in the back room that counted.

One morning in February when the weather was foul and sleet was slanting white and wet on to the window-panes of the office, Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were in their respective places as usual and each was engrossed, one might even say fascinated, by his and her own work. Mr Buggage, with a gold Parker pen poised above a note-pad, was reading The Times and jotting things down as he went along. Every now and again, he would refer to Who's Who and make more jottings.

Miss Tottle, who had been opening the mail, was now examining some cheques and adding up totals.

"Three today," she said.

"What's it come to?" Mr Buggage asked, not looking up.

"One thousand six hundred," Miss Tottle said. Mr Buggage said, "I don't

suppose we've 'eard anything yet from that bishop's 'ouse in Chester, 'ave we?"

"A bishop lives in a palace, Billy, not a house," Miss Tottle said.

"I don't give a sod where 'ee lives," Mr Buggage said. "But I get just a little bit uneasy when there's no quick answer from somebody like that."

"As a matter of fact, the reply came this morning," Miss Tottle said.

"Coughed up all right?"

"The full amount."

"That's a relief," Mr Buggage said. "We never done a bishop before and I'm not sure it was any too clever."

"The cheque came from some solicitors."

Mr Buggage looked up sharply. "Was there a letter?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Read it."

Miss Tottle found the letter and began to read: 'Dear Sir, With reference to your communication of the 4th Instant, we enclose herewith a cheque for £537 in full settlement. Yours faithfully, Smithson, Briggs and Ellis.' Miss Tottle paused. "That seems all right, doesn't it?"

"It's all right this time," Mr Buggage said. "But we don't want no more solicitors and let's not 'ave any more bishops either."

"I agree about bishops," Miss Tottle said. "But you're not suddenly ruling out earls and lords and all that lot, I hope?"

"Lords is fine," Mr Buggage said. "We never 'ad no trouble with lords. Nor earls either. And didn't we do a duke once?"

"The Duke of Dorset," Miss Tottle said. "Did him last year. Over a thousand and quid."

"Very nice," Mr Buggage said. "I remember selectin'

'im myself straight off the front page." He stopped talking while he prised a bit of food out from between two front teeth with the nail of his little finger. "What I says is this," he went on. "The bigger the title, the bigger the twit. In fact, anyone's got a title on 'is name is almost certain to be a twit."

"Now that's not quite true, Billy," Miss Tottle said. "Some people are given titles because they've done absolutely brilliant things, like inventing penicillin or climbing Mount Everest."

"I'm talking about inherited titles," Mr Buggage said. "Anyone gets born with a title, it's odds-on 'ee's a twit."

"You're right there," Miss Tottle said. "We've never had the slightest trouble with the aristocracy."

Mr Buggage leaned back in his chair and gazed solemnly at Miss Tottle.

"You know what?" he said. "One of these days we might even 'ave a crack at royalty."

"Ooh, I'd love it," Miss Tottle said. "Sock them for a fortune."

Mr Buggage continued to gaze at Miss Tottle's profile, and as he did so, a slightly lascivious glint crept into his eye. One is forced to admit that Miss Tottle's appearance, when judged by the highest standards, was disappointing. To tell the truth when judged by any standards, it was still disappointing. Her face was long and horsey and her teeth, which were also rather long, had a sulphurous tinge about them. So did her skin. The best you could say about her was that she had a generous bosom, but even that had its faults. It was the kind that makes a single long tightly bound bulge from one side of the chest to the other, and at first glance one got the impression that there were not two individual breasts growing out of her body but simply one big long loaf of bread.

Then again, Mr Buggage himself was in no position to be overly finicky. When one saw him for the first time, the word that sprang instantly to mind was 'grubby'. He was squat, paunchy, bald and flaccid, and so far as his face was concerned, one could only make a guess at what it looked like because not much of it was visible to the eye. The major part was covered over by an immense thicket of black, bushy, slightly curly hair, a fashion, one fears, that is all too common these days, a foolish practice and incidentally a rather dirty habit. Why so many males wish to conceal their facial characteristics is beyond the comprehension of us ordinary mortals. One must presume that if it were possible for these people also to grow hair all over their noses and cheeks and eyes, then they would do so, ending up with no visible face at all but only an obscene and rather gamey ball of hair. The only possible conclusion one can arrive at when looking at one of these bearded males is that the vegetation is a kind of smoke-screen and is cultivated in order to conceal something unsightly or unsavoury.

This was almost certainly true in Mr Buggage's case, and it was therefore fortunate for all of us, and especially for Miss Tottle, that the beard was there. Mr Buggage continued to gaze wistfully at his assistant. Then he said, "Now pet, why don't you 'urry up and get them cheques in the post because after you've done that I've got a little proposal to put to you."

Miss Tottle looked back over her shoulder at the speaker and gave him a smirk that showed the cutting edges of her sulphur teeth. Whenever he called her 'pet', it was a sure sign that feelings of a carnal nature were beginning to stir within Mr Buggage's breast, and in other parts as well.

"Tell it to me now, lover," she said.

"You get them cheques done first," he said. He could be very commanding at times, and Miss Tottle thought it was wonderful.

Miss Tottle now began what she called her Daily Audit. This involved examining all of Mr Buggage's bank accounts and all of her own and then deciding into which of them the latest cheques should be paid. Mr Buggage, you see, at this particular moment, had exactly sixty-six different accounts

in his own name and Miss Tottle had twenty-two. These were scattered around among various branches of the big three banks, Barclays, Lloyds, and National Westminster, all over London and a few in the suburbs. There was nothing wrong with that. And it had not been difficult, as the business became more and more successful, for either of them to walk into any branch of these banks and open a Current Account, with an initial deposit of a few hundred pounds. They would then receive a cheque book, a paying-in book and the promise of a monthly statement.

Mr Buggage had discovered early on that if a person has an account with several or even many different branches of a bank, this will cause no comment by the staff. Each branch deals strictly with its own customers and their names are not circulated to other branches or to Head Office, not even in these computerized times.

On the other hand, banks are required by law to notify the Inland Revenue of the names of all clients who have Deposit Accounts containing one thousand pounds or more. They must also report the amounts of interest earned.

But no such law applies to Current Accounts because they earn no interest. Nobody takes any notice of a person's Current Account unless it is overdrawn or unless, and this seldom happens, the balance becomes ridiculously large. A Current Account containing let us say £100,000 might easily raise an eyebrow or two among the staff, and the client would almost certainly get a nice letter from the manager suggesting that some of the money be placed on deposit to earn interest. But Mr Buggage didn't give a fig for interest and he wanted no raised eyebrows either. That is why he and Miss Tottle had eighty-eight different bank accounts between them. It was Miss Tottle's job to see that the amounts in each of these accounts never exceeded £20,000. Anything more than that might, in Mr Buggage's opinion, cause an eyebrow to raise, especially if it were left lying untouched in a Current Account for months or years. The agreement between the two partners was seventy-five per cent of the profits of the business to Mr Buggage and twenty-five per cent to Miss Tottle.

Miss Tottle's Daily Audit involved examining a list she kept of all the balances in all those eighty-eight separate accounts and then deciding into which of them the daily cheque or cheques should be deposited. She had in her filing cabinet eighty-eight different files, one for each bank account, and eighty-eight different cheque books and eighty-eight different paying-in books. Miss Tottle's task was not a complicated one but she had to keep her wits about her and not muddle things up. Only the previous week they had to open four new accounts at four new branches, three for Mr Buggage and one for Miss Tottle. "Soon we're goin' to 'ave over a 'undred accounts in our names," Mr Buggage had said to Miss Tottle at the time.

"Why not two hundred?" Miss Tottle had said.

"A day will come," Mr Buggage said, "when we'll 'ave used up all the banks in this part of the country and you and I is goin' to 'ave to travel all the way up to Sunderland or Newcastle to open new ones."

But now Miss Tottle was busy with her Daily Audit. "That's done," she said, putting the last cheque and the paying-in slip into its envelope.

"Ow much we got in our accounts all together at this very moment?" Mr Buggage asked her.

Miss Tottle unlocked the middle drawer of her writing-table and took out a plain school exercise book. On the cover she had written the words My old arithmetic book from school. She considered this a rather ingenious ploy designed to put people off the scent should the book ever fall into the wrong hands. "Just let me add on today's deposit," she said, finding the right page and beginning to write down figures. "There we are. Counting today, you have got in all the sixty-six branches, one million, three hundred and twenty thousand, six hundred and forty-three pounds, unless you've been cashing any cheques in the last few days."

"I 'aven't," Mr Buggage said. "And what've you got?"

"I have got... four hundred and thirty thousand, seven hundred and twenty-five pounds."

"Very nice," Mr Buggage said. "And 'ow long's it taken us to gather in those tidy little sums?"

"Just eleven years," Miss Tottle said. "What was that teeny weeny proposal you were going to put to me, lover?"

"Ah," Mr Buggage said, laying down his gold pencil and leaning back to gaze at her once again with that pale licentious eye. "I was just thinkin'.. 'ere 's exactly what I was thinkin' why on earth should a millionaire like me be sittin'

'ere in this filthy freezin' weather when I could be reclinin' in the lap of luxury beside a swimmin' pool with a nice girl like you to keep me company and flunkeys bringin' us goblets of iced champagne every few minutes?"

"Why indeed?" Miss Tottle cried, grinning widely.

"Then get out the book and let's see where we 'aven't been?"

Miss Tottle walked over to a bookshelf on the opposite wall and took down a thickish paperback called The 300 Best Hotels in the World chosen by Rene Lecler. She returned to her chair and said, "Where to this time, lover?"

"Somewhere in North Africa," Mr Buggage said. "This is February and you've got to go at least to North Africa to get it really warm. Italy's not 'ot enough yet, nor is Spain. And I don't want the flippin' West Indies. I've 'ad enough of them. Where 'aven't we been in North Africa?"

Miss Tottle was turning the pages of the book. "That's not so easy," she said. "We've done the Palais Jamai in Fez... and the Gazelle d'Or in Taroudan

t... and the Tunis Hilton in Tunis. We didn't like that one..

"Ow many we done so far altogether in that book?" Mr Buggage asked her.

"I think it was forty-eight the last time I counted."

"And I 'as every intention of doin' all three 'undred of 'em before I'm finished," Mr Buggage said. "That's my big ambition and I'll bet nobody else 'as ever done it."

"I think Mr Rene Lecler must have done it," Miss Tottle said. "'Oo's 'ee?"

"The man who wrote the book."

"Ee don't count," Mr Buggage said. He leaned sideways in his chair and began to scratch the left cheek of his rump in a slow meditative manner. "And I'll bet 'ee 'asn't anyway. These travel guides use any Tom, Dick and 'Arry to go round for 'em."

"Here's one!" Miss Tottle cried. "Hotel La Mamounia in Marrakech."

"Where's that?"

"In Morocco. Just round the top corner of Africa on the left-hand side."

"Go on then. What does it say about it?"

"It says," Miss Tottle read, "This was Winston Churchill's favourite haunt and from his balcony he painted the Atlas sunset time and again."

"I don't paint," Mr Buggage said. "What else does it say?"

Miss Tottle read on: "As the livened Moorish servant shows you into the tiled and latticed colonnaded court, you step decisively into an illustration of the 1001 Arabian nights..

"That's more like it," Mr Buggage said. "Go on."

"Your next contact with reality will come when you pay your bill on leaving."

"That don't worry us millionaires," Mr Buggage said. "Let's go. We'll leave tomorrow. Call that travel agent right away. First class. We'll shut the shop for ten days."

"Don't you want to do today's letters?"

"Bugger today's letters," Mr Buggage said. "We're on 'oliday from now on. Get on to that travel agent quick." He leaned the other way now and started scratching his right buttock with the fingers of his right hand. Miss Tottle watched him and Mr Buggage saw her watching him but he didn't care. "Call that travel agent," he said.

"And I'd better get us some Travellers Cheques," Miss Tottle said.

"Get five thousand quids' worth. I'll write the cheque. This one's on me. Give me a cheque book. Choose the nearest bank. And call that 'otel in wherever it was and ask for the biggest suite they're got. They're never booked up when you want the biggest suite."

Twenty-four hours later, Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were sunbathing

beside the pool at La Mamounia in Marrakech and they were drinking champagne.

"This is the life," Miss Tottle said. "Why don't we retire altogether and buy a grand house in a climate like this?"

"What do we want to retire for?" Mr Buggage said. "We got the best business in London goin' for us and personally I find that very enjoyable."

On the other side of the pool a dozen Moroccan servants were laying out a splendid buffet lunch for the guests. There were enormous cold lobsters and large pink hams and very small roast chickens and several kinds of rice and about ten different salads. A chef was grilling steaks over a charcoal fire. Guests were beginning to get up from deck-chairs and mattresses to mill around the buffet with plates in their hands. Some were in swimsuits, some in light summer clothes, and most had straw hats on their heads.

Mr Buggage was watching them. Almost without exception, they were English. They were the very rich English, smooth, well mannered, overweight, loud-voiced and infinitely dull. He had seen them before all around Jamaica and Barbados and places like that. It was evident that quite a few of them knew one another because at home, of course, they moved in the same circles. But whether they knew each other or not, they certainly accepted each other because all of them belonged to the same nameless and exclusive club. Any member of this club could always, by some subtle social alchemy, recognize a fellow member at a glance. Yes, they say to themselves, he's one of us. She's one of us. Mr Buggage was not one of them. He was not in the club and he never would be. He was a nouveau and that, regardless of how many millions he had, was unacceptable. He was also overtly vulgar and that was unacceptable, too. The very rich could be just as vulgar as Mr Buggage, or even more so, but they did it in a different way.

"There they are," Mr Buggage said, looking across the pool at the guests. "Them's our bread and butter. Every one of 'em's likely to be a future customer."

"How right you are," Miss Tottle said.

Mr Buggage, lying on a mattress that was striped in blue, red, and green, was propped up on one elbow, staring at the guests. His stomach was bulging out in folds over his swimming-trunks and droplets of sweat were running out of the fatty crevices. Now he shifted his gaze to the recumbent figure of Miss Tottle lying beside him on her own mattress. Miss Tottle's loaf-of-bread bosom was encased in a strip of scarlet bikini. The bottom half of the bikini was daringly brief and possibly a shade too small and Mr Buggage could see traces of black hair high up on the inside of her thighs.

"We'll lave our lunch, pet, then we'll go to our room and take a little nap, right?"

Miss Tottle displayed her sulphurous teeth and nodded her head.

"And after that we'll do some letters."

"Letters?" she cried. "I don't want to do letters! I thought this was going to be a holiday!"

"It is a 'oliday, pet, but I don't like lettin' good business go to waste.

The 'otel will lend you a typewriter. I already checked on that. And they're lendin' me their 'Oo's 'Oo. Every good 'otel in the world keeps an English 'Oo 's 'Oo. The manager likes to know 'oo's important so lee can kiss their backsides."

"They won't find you in it," Miss Tottle said, a bit huffy now.

"No," Mr Buggage said. "I'll grant you that. But they won't find many in it that's got more money'n me neither. In this world, it's not 'oo you are, my girl. It's not even 'oo you know. It's what you got that counts."

"We've never done letters on holiday before," Miss Tottle said.

"There's a first time for everything, pet."

"How can we do letters without newspapers?"

"You know very well English papers always go airmail to places like this. I bought a Times in the foyer when we arrived. It's actually the same as I was workin' on in the office yesterday so I done most of my 'omework already. I'm beginning to fancy a piece of that lobster over there. You ever seen bigger lobsters than that?"

"But you're surely not going to post the letters from here, are you?" Miss Tottle said.

"Certainly not. We'll leave 'em undated and date 'em and post 'em as soon as we return. That way we'll 'ave a nice backlog up our sleeves."

Miss Tottle stared at the lobsters on the table across the pool, then at the people milling around, then she reached out and placed a hand on Mr Buggage's thigh, high up under the bathing-shorts. She began to stroke the hair y thigh. "Come on, Billy," she said, "why don't we take a break from the letters same as we always do when we're on hols?"

"You surely don't want us throwing about a thousand quid away a day, do you?" Mr Buggage said. "And quarter of it yours, don't forget that."

"We don't have the firm's notepaper and we can't use hotel paper, for God's sake."

"I brought the notepaper," Mr Buggage said, triumphant. "I got a 'ole box of it. And envelopes."

"Oh, all right," Miss Tottle said. "Are you going to fetch me some of that lobster, lover?"

"We'll go together," Mr Buggage said, and he stood up and started waddling round the pool in those almost knee-length bathing-trunks he had bought a couple of years back in Honolulu. They had a pattern of green and yellow and white flowers on them. Miss Tottle got to her feet and followed him.

Mr Buggage was busy helping himself at the buffet when he heard a man'

s voice behind him saying, "Fiona, I don't think you've met Mrs Smith-Swithin... and this is Lady Hedgecock,"

"How d'you do" ... "How d'you do," the voices said.

Mr Buggage glanced round at the speakers. There was a man and a woman in swimmingclothes and two elderly ladies wearing cotton dresses. Those names, he thought. I've heard those names before, I know I have... SmithS within... Lady Hedgecock. He shrugged and continued to load food on to his plate.

A few minutes later, he was sitting with Miss Tottle at a small table under a sun-umbrella and each of them was tucking into an immense half lobster. "Tell me, does the name Lady 'Edgecock mean anything to you?" Mr Buggage asked, talking with his mouth full.

"Lady Hedgecock? She's one of our clients. Or she was. I never forget names like that. Why?"

"And what about a Mrs Smith-Swithin? Does that also ring a bell?"

"It does, actually," Miss Tottle said. "Both of them do. Why do you ask that suddenly?"

"Because both of 'em's 'ere."

"Good God! How d'you know?"

"And what's more, my girl, they're together! They're chums!"

"They're not!"

"Oh, yes they are!"

Mr Buggage told her how he knew. "There they are," he said, pointing with a fork whose prongs were yellow with mayonnaise. "Those two fat old broads talkin' to the tall man and the woman."

Miss Tottle stared, fascinated. "You know," she said, "I've never actually seen a client of ours in the flesh before, not in all the years we've been in business."

"Nor me," Mr Buggage said. "One thing's for sure. I picked 'em right, didn't I? They're rolling in it. That's obvious. And they're stupid. That's even more obvious."

"Do you think it could be dangerous, Billy, the two of them knowing each other?"

"It's a bloody queer coincidence," Mr Buggage said, "but I don't think it's dangerous. Neither of 'em's ever goin' to say a word. That's the beauty of it."

"I guess you're right."

"The only possible danger," Mr Buggage said, "would be if they saw my name on the register. I got a very unusual name just like theirs. It would ring bells at once."

"Guests don't see the register," Miss Tottle said.

"No, they don't," Mr Buggage said. "No one's ever goin' to bother us. The

y never 'as and they never will."

"Amazing lobster," Miss Tottle said. "Lobster is sex food," Mr Buggage announced, eating more of it.

"You're thinking of oysters, lover."

"I am not thinking of oysters. Oysters is sex food, too, but lobsters is stronger. A dish of lobsters can drive some people crazy."

"Like you, perhaps?" she said, wriggling her rump in the chair.

"Maybe," Mr Buggage said. "We shall just 'ave to wait and see about that, won't we, pet?"

"Yes," she said.

"It's a good thing they're so expensive," Mr Buggage said. "If every Tom, Dick and 'Arry could afford to buy 'em, the We world would be full of sex maniacs."

"Keep eating it," she said.

After lunch, the two of them went upstairs to their suite, where they cavorted clumsily on the huge bed for a brief period. Then they took a nap.

And now they were in their private sittingroom and were wearing only dressing-gowns over their nakedness, Mr Buggage in a plum-coloured silk one, Miss Tottle in pastel pink and pale green. Mr Buggage was reclining on the sofa with a copy of yesterday's Times on his lap and a Who's Who on the coffee table.

Miss Tottle was at the writing-desk with a hotel typewriter before her and a notebook in her hand. Both were again drinking champagne.

"This is a prime one," Mr Buggage was saying. "Sir Edward Leishman. Got the lead obit. Chairman of Aerodynamics Engineering. One of our major industrialists, it says."

"Nice," Miss Tottle said. "Make sure the wife's alive."

"Leaves a widow and three children," Mr Buggage read out. "And... wait a minute... in '00's 'Oo it says, Recreations, walkin' and fishin'. Clubs, White's and the Reform."

"Address?" Miss Tottle asked.

"The Red House, Andover, Wilts."

"How d'you spell Leishman?" Miss Tottle asked. Mr Buggage spelled it.

"How much shall we go for?"

"A lot," Mr Buggage said. "He was loaded. Try around nine 'undred."

"You want to slip in The Compleat Angler?"

It says he was a fisherman."

"Yes. First edition. Four 'undred and twenty quid. You know the rest of it by 'eart. Bang it out quick. I got another good one to come."

Miss Tottle put a sheet of notepaper into the typewriter and very rapidly she began to type. She had done so many thousands of these letters over the years that she never had to pause for one word. She even knew how to

compile the list of books so that it came out to around nine hundred pounds or three hundred and fifty pounds or five hundred and twenty or whatever. She could make it come out to any sum Mr Buggage thought the client would stand. One of the secrets of this particular trade, as Mr Buggage knew, was never to be too greedy. Never go over a thousand quid with anyone, not even a famous millionaire.

The letter, as Miss Tottle typed it, went like this: WILLIAM BUGGAGE--RARE BOOKS 27a Charing Cross Road, London.

Dear Lady Leishman,

It is with very great regret that I trouble you at this tragic time of your bereavement, but regretfully I am left with no alternative in the circumstances.

I had the pleasure of serving your late husband over a number of years and my invoices were always sent to him care of White's Club, as indeed were many of the little parcels of books that he collected with such enthusiasm.

He was always a prompt settler and a very pleasant gentleman to deal with. I am listing below his more recent purchases, those which, alas, he had ordered in more recent times before he passed away and which were delivered to him in the usual manner.

Perhaps I should explain to you that publications of this nature are often very rare and can therefore be rather costly. Some are privately printed, some are actually banned in this country and those are more costly still.

Rest assured, dear madam, that I always conduct business in the strictest confidence. My own reputation over many years in the trade is the best guarantee of my discretion. When the bill is paid, that is the last you will hear of the matter, unless of course you happen to be able to lay hands on your late husband's collection of erotica, in which case I should be happy to make you an offer for it.

The Books: THE COMPLEAT ANGLER, Isaak Walton, First Edition. Good clean copy. Some rubbing of edges. Rare. £420 LOVE IN FURS, Leopold von Sacher Masoch, 1920 edition. Slip cover. £75 SEXUAL SECRETS, Translation from Danish. £40 HOW TO PLEASURE YOUNG GIRLS WHEN YOU ARE OVER SIXTY, Illustrations. Private printing from Paris. £95 THE ART OF PUNISHMENT--THE CANE, THE WHIP AND THE LASH, Translated from German. Banned in U.K. £115 THREE NAUGHTY NUNS, Good clean edition. £60 RESTRAINT--SHACKLES AND SILKEN CORDS, Illustrations. £80 WHY TEENAGERS PREFER OLD MEN, Illustrations. American. £90 THE LONDON DIRECTORY OF ESCORTS AND HOSTESSES, Current edition. £20 Total now due: £995 Yours faithfully, William Buggage "Right," Miss

Tottle said, running the notepaper out of her typewriter. "Done that at one. But you realize I don't have my 'Bible' here, so I'll have to check the names when I get home before posting the letters."

"You do that," Mr Buggage said.

Miss Tottle's Bible was a massive index-card file in which were recorded the names and addresses of every client they had written to since the beginning of the business. The purpose of this was to try as nearly as possible to ensure that no two members of the same family received a Buggage invoice. If this were to happen, there would always be the danger that they might compare notes. It also served to guard against a case where a widow who had received one invoice upon the death of her first husband might be sent another invoice on the death of the second husband. That, of course, would let the cat right out of the bag. There was no guaranteed way of avoiding this perilous mistake because the widow would have changed her name when she remarried, but Miss Tottle had developed an instinct for sniffing out such pitfalls, and the Bible helped her to do it.

"What's next?" Miss Tottle asked.

"The next is Major General Lionel Anstruther. Here 'ee is. Got about six inches in 'Oo's 'Oo. Clubs, Army and Navy. Recreations, Ridin' to 'Ounds."

"I suppose he fell off a horse and broke his flipping neck," Miss Tottle said. "I'll start with Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man, first edition, right?"

"Right. Two 'undred and twenty quid," Mr Buggage said. "And make it between five and six 'undred altogether."

"Okay."

"And put in The Sting of the Ridin' Crop.

Whips seem to come natural to these foxhuntin' folk."

And so it went on.

The holiday in Marrakech continued pleasantly enough and nine days later Mr Buggage and Miss Tottle were back in the office in Charing Cross Road, both with sun-scorched skins as red as the shells of the many lobsters they had eaten. They quickly settled down again into their normal and stimulating routine. Day after day the letters went out and the cheques came in. It was remarkable how smoothly the business ran. The psychology behind it was, of course, very sound. Strike a widow at the height of her grief, strike her with something that is unbearably awful, something she wants to forget about and put behind her, something she wants nobody else to discover. What's more, the funeral is imminent. So she pays up fast to get the sordid little business out of the way. Mr Buggage knew his onions. In all the years he had been operating, he had never once had a protest or an angry reply. Just a cheque in an envelope. Now and again, but not often, there was no reply at all. The disbelieving widow had been brave enough to sling his letter into the waste-paper basket and that was the end of it. None of them quite

dared to challenge the invoice because they could never be absolutely positive that the late husband had been as pure as the wife believed and hoped. Men never are. In many cases, of course, the widow knew very well that her beloved had been a lecherous old bird and Mr Buggage's invoice came as no surprise. So she paid up even faster.

About a month after their return from Marrakech, on a wet and rainy afternoon in March, Mr Buggage was reclining comfortably in his office with his feet up on the top of his fine partner's desk, dictating to Miss Tottle some details about a deceased and distinguished admiral. "Recreations," he was saying, reading from Who's Who, "Gardening, sailing and stamp-collecting ... " At that point, the door from the main shop opened and a young man came in with a book in his hand. "Mr Buggage?" he said.

Mr Buggage looked up. "Over there," he said, waving towards Miss Tottle. "She'll deal with you."

The young man stood still. His navy-blue overcoat was wet from the weather and droplets of water were dripping from his hair. He didn't look at Miss Tottle. He kept his eyes on Mr Buggage. "Don't you want the money?" he said, pleasantly enough.

"She'll take it."

"Why won't you take it?"

"Because she's the cashier," Mr Buggage said. "You want to buy a book, go ahead. She'll deal with you."

"I'd rather deal with you," the young man said.

Mr Buggage looked up at him. "Go on," he said. "Just do as you're told, there's a good lad."

"You are the proprietor?" the young man said. "You are Mr William Buggage?"

"What if I am," Mr Buggage said, his feet still up on the desk.

"Are you or aren't you?"

"What's it to you?" Mr Buggage said.

"So that's settled," the young man said. "How d'you do, Mr Buggage." There was a curious edge to his voice now, a mixture of scorn and mockery.

Mr Buggage took his feet down from the desk-top and sat up a trifle straighter. "You're a bit of a cheeky young bugger, aren't you," he said. "If you want that book, I suggest you just pay your money over there and then you can 'op it. Right?"

The young man turned towards the still open door that led to the front of the shop. Just the other side of the door there were a couple of the usual kind of customers, men in raincoats, pulling out books and examining them.

"Mother," the young man called softly. "You can come in, Mother. Mr Buggage is here."

A small woman of about sixty came in and stood beside the young man. Sh

She had a trim figure for her age and a face that must once have been ravishing, but now it showed traces of strain and exhaustion, and the pale blue eyes were dulled with grief. She was wearing a black coat and a simple black hat. She left the door open behind her.

"Mr Buggage," the young man said. "This is my mother, Mrs Northcote."

Miss Tottle, the rememberer of names, turned round quick and looked at Mr Buggage and made little warning movements with her mouth. Mr Buggage got the message and said as politely as he could, "And what can I do for you, madam?"

The woman opened her black handbag and took out a letter. She unfolded it carefully and held it out to Mr Buggage. "Then it will be you who sent me this?" she said.

Mr Buggage took the letter and examined it at some length. Miss Tottle, who had turned right round in her chair now, was watching Mr Buggage.

"Yes," Mr Buggage said. "This is my letter and my invoice. All correct and in order. What is your problem, madam?"

"What I came here to ask you," the woman said, "is, are you sure it's right?"

"I'm afraid it is, madam."

"But it is so unbelievable... I find it impossible to believe that my husband bought those books."

"Let's see now, your husband, Mr... Mr "Northcote," Miss Tottle said.

"Yes, Mr Northcote, yes, of course, Mr Northcote. 'Ee wasn't in 'ere of ten, once or twice a year maybe, but a good customer and a very fine gentleman. May I offer you, madam, my sincere condolences on your sad loss."

"Thank you, Mr Buggage. But are you really quite certain you haven't been mixing him up with somebody else?"

"Not a chance, madam. Not the slightest chance. My good secretary over there will confirm that there is no mistake."

"May I see it?" Miss Tottle said, getting up and crossing to take the letter from Mr Buggage. "Yes," she said, examining it. "I typed this myself. There is no mistake."

"Miss Tottle's been with me a long time," Mr Buggage said. "She knows the business inside out. I can't remember 'er ever makin' a mistake."

"I should hope not," Miss Tottle said.

"So there you are, madam," Mr Buggage said.

"It simply isn't possible," the woman said.

"Ah, but men will be men," Mr Buggage said. "They all 'ave their little bit of fun now and again and there's no 'arm in that, is there, madam?" He sat confident and unmoved in his chair, waiting now to have done with it. He felt himself master of the situation.

The woman stood very straight and still, and she was looking Mr Buggage directly in the eyes. "These curious books you list on your invoice," she said, "do they print them in Braille?"

"In what?"

"In Braille."

"I don't know what you're talking about, madam."

"I thought you wouldn't," she said. "That's the only way my husband could have read them. He lost his sight in the last war, in the Battle of Alamein more than forty years ago, and he was blind for ever after."

The office became suddenly very quiet. The mother and her son stood motionless, watching Mr Buggage. Miss Tottle turned away and looked out of the window. Mr Buggage cleared his throat as though to say something, but thought better of it. The two men in raincoats, who were close enough to have heard every word through the open door, came quietly into the office. One of them held out a plastic card and said to Mr Buggage, "Inspector Richards, Serious Crimes Division, Scotland Yard." And to Miss Tottle, who was already moving back towards her desk, he said, "Don't touch any of those papers, please miss. Leave everything just where it is. You're both coming along with us."

The son took his mother gently by the arm and led her out of the office, through the shop and on to the street.

The Hitchhiker

I HAD a new car. It was an exciting toy, a big BMW 3.3 Li, which means 3.3 litre, long wheelbase, fuel injection. It had a top speed of 129 mph and terrific acceleration. The body was pale blue. The seats inside were darker blue and they were made of leather, genuine soft leather of the finest quality. The windows were electrically operated and so was the sunroof. The radio aerial popped up when I switched on the radio, and disappeared when I switched it off. The powerful engine growled and grunted impatiently at slow speeds, but at sixty miles an hour the growling stopped and the motor began to purr with pleasure.

I was driving up to London by myself. It was a lovely June day. They were haymaking in the fields and there were buttercups along both sides of the road. I was whispering along at 70 mph, leaning back comfortably in my seat, with no more than a couple of fingers resting lightly on the wheel to keep her steady. Ahead of me I saw a man thumbing a lift. I touched the brake and brought the car to a stop beside him. I always stopped for hitchhikers. I knew just how it used to feel to be standing on the side of a country road wa

tching the cars go by. I hated the drivers for pretending they didn't see me, especially the ones in big empty cars with three empty seats. The large expensive cars seldom stopped. It was always the smaller ones that offered you a lift, or the rusty ones or the ones that were already crammed full of children and the driver would say, 'I think we can squeeze in one more.'

The hitchhiker poked his head through the open window and said, "Goin' to London, guv'nor?"

"Yes," I said. "Jump in."

He got in and I drove on.

He was a small ratty-faced man with grey teeth. His eyes were dark and quick and clever, like rat's eyes, and his ears were slightly pointed at the top. He had a cloth cap on his head and he was wearing a greyish-coloured jacket with enormous pockets. The grey jacket, together with the quick eyes and the pointed ears, made him look more than anything like some sort of huge human rat.

"What part of London are you headed for?" I asked him.

"I'm going right through London and out the other side," he said. "I'm goin' to Epsom, for the races. It's Derby Day today."

"So it is," I said. "I wish I were going with you. I love betting on horses."

"I never bet on horses," he said. "I don't even watch 'em run. That's a stupid silly business."

"Then why do you go?" I asked.

He didn't seem to like that question. His ratty little face went absolutely blank and he sat there staring straight ahead at the road, saying nothing.

"I expect you help to work the betting machines or something like that,"

I said. "That's even sillier," he answered. "There's no fun working them lousy machines and selling tickets to mugs. Any fool could do that."

There was a long silence. I decided not to question him any more. I remembered how irritated I used to get in my hitchhiking days when drivers kept asking me questions. Where are you going? Why are you going there? What's your job? Are you married? Do you have a girlfriend? What's her name? How old are you? And so forth and so forth. I used to hate it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's none of my business what you do. The trouble is I'm a writer, and most writers are terribly nosy."

"You write books?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Writin' books is okay," he said. "It's what I call a skilled trade. I'm in a skilled trade too. The folks I despise is them that spend all their lives doin' crummy old routine jobs with no skill in 'em at all. You see what I mean?"

"Yes."

"The secret of life," he said, "is to become very very good at somethin' that's very very 'ard to do."

"Like you," I said.

"Exactly. You and me both."

"What makes you think that I'm any good at my job?" I asked. "There's an awful lot of bad writers around."

"You wouldn't be drivin' about in a car like this if you weren't no good at it," he answered. "It must've cost a tidy packet, this little job."

"It wasn't cheap."

"What can she do flat out?" he asked.

"One hundred and twenty-nine miles an hour," I told him.

"I'll bet she won't do it."

"I'll bet she will."

"All car-makers is liars," he said. "You can buy any car you like and it'll never do what the makers say it will in the ads."

"This one will."

"Open 'er up then and prove it," he said. "Go on guv'nor, open 'er up and let's see what she'll do."

There is a traffic circle at Chalfont St Peter and immediately beyond there's a long straight section of divided highway. We came out of the circle onto the highway and I pressed my foot hard down on the accelerator. The big car leaped forward as though she'd been stung. In ten seconds or so, we were doing ninety.

"Lovely!" he cried. "Beautiful! Keep goin'!"

I had the accelerator jammed down against the floor and I held it there.

"One hundred!" he shouted. "A hundred and five! A hundred and ten! A hundred and fifteen! Go on! Don't slack off!"

I was in the outside lane and we flashed past several cars as though they were standing still a green Mini, a big cream-coloured Citroen, a white Land Rover, a huge truck with a container on the back, an orange coloured Volkswagen Minibus "A hundred and twenty!" my passenger shouted, jumping up and down. "Go on! Go on! Get 'er up to one-two-nine!"

At that moment, I heard the scream of a police siren. It was so loud it seemed to be right inside the car, and then a cop on a motorcycle loomed up alongside us in the inside lane and went past us and raised a hand for us to stop.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!" I said. "That's torn it!"

The cop must have been doing about a hundred and thirty when he passed us, and he took plenty of time slowing down. Finally, he pulled to the side of the road and I pulled in behind him. "I didn't know police motorcycles could go as fast as that," I said rather lamely.

"That one can," my passenger said. "It's the same make as yours. It's a BMW R90S. Fastest bike on the road. That's what they're usin' nowadays."

The cop got off his motorcycle and leaned the machine sideways onto its

prop stand. Then he took off his gloves and placed them carefully on the seat. He was in no hurry now. He had us where he wanted us and he knew it.

"This is real trouble," I said. "I don't like it one little bit."

"Don't talk to 'im more than necessary, you understand," my companion said. "Just sit tight and keep mum."

Like an executioner approaching his victim, the cop came strolling slowly towards us. He was a big meaty man with a belly, and his blue breeches were skin-tight around enormous thighs. His goggles were pulled up onto the helmet, showing a smouldering red face with wide cheeks. We sat there like guilty schoolboys, waiting for him to arrive.

"Watch out for this man," my passenger whispered, "e looks mean as the devil."

The cop came round to my open window and placed one meaty hand on the sill. "What's the hurry?" he said.

"No hurry, officer," I answered.

"Perhaps there's a woman in the back having a baby and you're rushing her to hospital? Is that it?"

"No, officer."

"Or perhaps your house is on fire and you're dashing home to rescue the family from upstairs?" His voice was dangerously soft and mocking.

"My house isn't on fire, officer."

"In that case," he said, "you've got yourself into a nasty mess, haven't you? Do you know what the speed limit is in this country?"

"Seventy," I said.

"And do you mind telling me exactly what speed you were doing just now?"

I shrugged and didn't say anything.

When he spoke next, he raised his voice so loud that I jumped. "One hundred and twenty miles per hour!" he barked. "That's fifty miles an hour over the limit!"

He turned his head and spat out a big gob of spit. It landed on the wing of my car and started sliding down over my beautiful blue paint. Then he turned back again and stared hard at my passenger. "And who are you?" he asked sharply. "He's a hitchhiker," I said. "I'm giving him a lift."

"I didn't ask you," he said. "I asked him."

"Ave I done somethin' wrong?" my passenger asked. His voice was soft and oily as haircream.

"That's more than likely," the cop answered. "Anyway, you're a witness. I'll deal with you in a minute. Driver's licence," he snapped, holding out his hand.

I gave him my driver's licence.

He unbuttoned the left-hand breast pocket of his tunic and brought out t

he dreaded book of tickets. Carefully he copied the name and address from my licence. Then he gave it back to me. He strolled around to the front of the car and read the number from the licence plate and wrote that down as well. He filled in the date, the time and the details of my offence. Then he tore out the top copy of the ticket. But before handing it to me, he checked that all information had come through clearly on his own carbon copy. Finally, he replaced the book in his breast pocket and fastened the button.

"Now you," he said to my passenger, and he walked around to the other side of the car. From the other breast pocket he produced a small black notebook. "Name?" he snapped.

"Michael Fish," my passenger said.

"Address?"

"Fourteen, Windsor Lane, Luton."

"Show me something to prove this is your real name and address," the policeman said.

My passenger fished in his pockets and came out with a driver's licence of his own. The policeman checked the name and address and handed it back to him. "What's your job?" he asked sharply.

"I'm an 'od carrier."

"A what?"

"An 'od carrier."

"Spell it."

"H-o-d c-a--Ó "That'll do. And what's a hod carrier, may I ask?"

"An 'od carrier, officer, is a person 'oo carries the cement up the ladder to the bricklayer. And the 'od is what 'ee carries it in. It's got a long 'andle, and on the top you've got bits of wood set at an angle..

"All right, all right. Who's your employer?"

"Don't 'ave one. I'm unemployed."

The cop wrote this down in the black notebook. Then he returned the book to his pocket and did up the button.

"When I get back to the station I'm going to do a little checking up on you," he said to my passenger.

"Me? What've I done wrong?" the rat-faced man asked.

"I don't like your face, that's all," the cop said. "And we just might have a picture of it somewhere in our files." He strolled round the car and returned to my window.

"I suppose you know you're in serious trouble," he said to me.

"Yes, officer."

"You won't be driving this fancy car of yours again for a very long time, not after we've finished with you. You won't be driving any car again, come to that, for several years. And a good thing, too. I hope they lock you up for a spell into the bargain."

"You mean prison?" I asked, alarmed.

"Absolutely," he said, smacking his lips. "In the clink. Behind the bars. Along with all the other criminals who break the law. And a hefty fine into the bargain. Nobody will be more pleased about that than me. I'll see you in court, both of you. You'll be getting a summons to appear."

He turned and walked over to his motorcycle. He flipped the prop stand back into position with his foot and swung his leg over the saddle. Then he kicked the starter and roared off up the road out of sight.

"Phew!" I gasped. "That's done it."

"We was caught," my passenger said. "We was caught good and proper."

"I was caught, you mean."

"That's right," he said. "What you goin' to do now, gov'nor?"

"I'm going straight up to London to talk to my solicitor," I said. I started my car and drove on.

"You mustn't believe what 'ee said to you about goin' to prison," my passenger said. "They don't put somebody in the clink just for speedin'."

"Are you sure of that?" I asked.

"I'm positive," he answered. "They can take your licence away and they can give you a whoppin' big fine, but that'll be the end of it." I felt tremendously relieved.

"By the way," I said, "why did you lie to him?"

"Who, me?" he said. "What makes you think I lied?"

"You told him you were an unemployed hod carrier. But you told me you were in a highly skilled trade."

"So I am," he said. "But it don't do to tell everythin' to a copper."

"So what do you do?" I asked him.

"Ah," he said slyly. "That'd be tellin', wouldn't it?"

"Is it something you're ashamed of?"

"Ashamed?" he cried. "Me, ashamed of my job? I'm about as proud of it as anybody could be in the entire world!"

"Then why won't you tell me?"

"You writers really is nosy parkers, aren't you?" he said. "And you ain't goin' to be 'appy, I don't think, until you've found out exactly what the answer is?"

"I don't really care one way or the other," I told him, lying.

He gave me a crafty look out of the sides of his eyes. "I think you do care," he said. "I can see it in your face that you think I'm in some kind of very peculiar trade and you're just achin' to know what it is."

I didn't like the way he read my thoughts. I kept quiet and stared at the road ahead.

"You'd be right, too," he went on. "I am in a very peculiar trade. I'm in the queerest peculiar trade of 'em all." I waited for him to go on.

"That's why I 'as to be extra careful 'oo I'm talking to, you see. 'Ow am I to know, for instance, you're not another copper in plain clothes?"

"Do I look like a copper?"

"No," he said. "You don't. And you ain't. Any fool could tell that."

He took from his pocket a tin of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers and started to roll a cigarette. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, and the speed with which he performed this rather difficult operation was incredible. The cigarette was rolled and ready in about five seconds. He ran his tongue along the edge of the paper, stuck it down and popped the cigarette between his lips. Then, as if from nowhere, a lighter appeared in his hand. The lighter flamed. The cigarette was lit. The lighter disappeared. It was altogether a remarkable performance.

"I've never seen anyone roll a cigarette as fast as that," I said.

"Ah," he said, taking a deep suck of smoke. "So you noticed."

"Of course I noticed. It was quite fantastic."

He sat back and smiled. It pleased him very much that I had noticed how quickly he could roll a cigarette. "You want to know what makes me able to do it?" he asked.

"Go on then."

"It's because I've got fantastic fingers. These fingers of mine," he said, holding up both hands high in front of him, "are quicker and cleverer than the fingers of the best piano player in the world!"

"Are you a piano player?"

"Don't be daft," he said. "Do I look like a piano player?"

I glanced at his fingers. They were so beautifully shaped, so slim and long and elegant, they didn't seem to belong to the rest of him at all. They looked like the fingers of a brain surgeon or a watchmaker.

"My job," he went on, "is a hundred times more difficult than playin' the piano. Any twerp can learn to do that. There's titchy little kids learnin' to play the piano at almost any 'ouse you go into these days. That's right, ain't it?"

"More or less," I said.

"Of course it's right. But there's not one person in ten million can learn to do what I do. Not one in ten million! 'Ow about that?"

"Amazing," I said.

"You're darn right it's amazin'," he said.

"I think I know what you do," I said. "You do conjuring tricks. You're a conjuror."

"Me?" he snorted. "A conjuror? Can you picture me goin' round crummy kids' parties makin' rabbits come out of top 'ats?"

"Then you're a card player. You get people into card games and you deal yourself out marvellous hands."

"Me! A rotten cardsharp!" he cried. "That's a miserable racket if ever there was one."

"All right. I give up."

I was taking the car along slowly now, at no more than forty miles an hour, to make sure I wasn't stopped again. We had come onto the main London-Oxford road and were running down the hill toward Denham.

Suddenly, my passenger was holding up a black leather belt in his hand. "Ever seen this before?" he asked. The belt had a brass buckle of unusual design.

"Hey!" I said. "That's mine, isn't it? It is mine! Where did you get it?"

He grinned and waved the belt gently from side to side. "Where d'you think I got it?" he said. "Off the top of your trousers, of course."

I reached down and felt for my belt. It was gone.

"You mean you took it off me while we've been driving along?" I asked flabbergasted.

He nodded, watching me all the time with those little black ratty eyes.

"That's impossible." I said. "You'd have had to undo the buckle and slide the whole thing out through the loops all the way round. I'd have seen you doing it. And even if I hadn't seen you, I'd have felt it."

"Ah, but you didn't, did you?" he said, triumphant. He dropped the belt on his lap, and now all at once there was a brown shoelace dangling from his fingers. "And what about this, then?" he exclaimed, waving the shoelace.

"What about it?" I said.

"Anyone around 'ere missing a shoelace?" he asked, grinning.

I glanced down at my shoes. The lace of one of them was missing. "Good grief!" I said. "How did you do that? I never saw you bending down."

"You never saw nothin'," he said proudly. "You never even saw me move an inch. And you know why?"

"Yes," I said. "Because you've got fantastic fingers."

"Exactly right!" he cried. "You catch on pretty quick, don't you?" He sat back and sucked away at his homemade cigarette, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream against the windshield. He knew he had impressed me greatly with those two tricks, and this made him very happy. "I don't want to be late," he said. "What time is it?"

"There's a clock in front of you," I told him.

"I don't trust car clocks," he said. "What does your watch say?"

I hitched up my sleeve to look at the watch on my wrist. It wasn't there. I looked at the man. He looked back at me, grinning.

"You've taken that, too," I said.

He held out his hand and there was my watch lying in his palm. "Nice bit of stuff, this," he said. "Superior quality. Eighteen-carat gold. Easy to sell, too. It's never any trouble gettin' rid of quality goods."

"I'd like it back, if you don't mind," I said rather huffily.

He placed the watch carefully on the leather tray in front of him. "I wouldn't nick anything from you, guv'nor," he said. "You're my pal. You're givin' me a lift."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said.

"All I'm doin' is answerin' your question," he went on. "You asked me what I do for a livin' and I'm showin' you."

"What else have you got of mine?"

He smiled again, and now he started to take from the pocket of his jacket one thing after another that belonged to me--my driver's licence, a key ring with four keys on it, some pound notes, a few coins, a letter from my publishers, my diary, a stubby old pencil, a cigarette lighter, and last of all, a beautiful old sapphire ring with pearls around it belonging to my wife. I was taking the ring up to a jeweller in London because one of the pearls was missing.

"Now there's another lovely piece of goods," he said, turning the ring over in his fingers. "That's eighteenth century, if I'm not mistaken, from the reign of King George the Third."

"You're right," I said, impressed. "You're absolutely right."

He put the ring on the leather tray with the other items.

"So you're a pickpocket," I said.

"I don't like that word," he answered. "It's a coarse and vulgar word. Pickpockets is coarse and vulgar people who only do easy little amateur jobs. They lift money from blind old ladies."

"What do you call yourself, then?"

"Me? I'm a fingersmith. I'm a professional fingersmith." He spoke the words solemnly and proudly, as though he were telling me he was President of the Royal College of Surgeons or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

"I've never heard that word before," I said. "Did you invent it?"

"Of course I didn't invent it," he replied. "It's the name given to them who's risen to the very top of the profession. You've heard of a goldsmith or a silversmith, for instance. They're experts with gold and silver. I'm an expert with my fingers, so I'm a fingersmith."

"It must be an interesting job."

"It's a marvellous job," he answered. "It's lovely."

"And that's why you go to the races?"

"Race meetings is easy meat," he said. "You just stand around after the race, watchin' for the lucky ones to queue up and draw their money. And when you see someone collectin' a big bundle of notes, you simply follows after 'im and 'elps yourself. But don't get me wrong, guv'nor. I never takes nothin' from a loser. Nor from poor people neither. I only go after them as can afford it, the winners and the rich."

"That's very thoughtful of you," I said. "How often do you get caught?"

"Caught?" he cried, disgusted. "Me get caught! It's only pickpockets get caught. Fingersmiths never. Listen, I could take the false teeth out of your mouth if I wanted to and you wouldn't even catch me!"

"I don't have false teeth," I said.

"I know you don't," he answered. "Otherwise I'd 'ave 'ad 'em out long ago!"

I believed him. Those long slim fingers of his seemed able to do anything. We drove on for a while without talking.

"That policeman's going to check up on you pretty thoroughly," I said. "Doesn't that worry you a bit?"

"Nobody's checkin' up on me," he said.

"Of course they are. He's got your name and address written down most carefully in his black book."

The man gave me another of his sly ratty little smiles. "Ah" he said. "So 'ee 'as. But I'll bet 'ee ain't got it all written down in 'is memory as well. I've never known a copper yet with a decent memory. Some of 'em can't even remember their own names."

"What's memory got to do with it?" I asked. "It's written down in his book, isn't it?"

"Yes, guv'nor, it is. But the trouble is, 'ee's lost the book. 'Ee's lost both books, the one with my name on it and the one with yours."

In the long delicate fingers of his right hand, the man was holding up in triumph the two books he had taken from the policeman's pockets. "Easiest job I ever done," he announced proudly.

I nearly swerved the car into a milk truck, I was so excited.

"That copper's got nothin' on either of us now," he said.

"You're a genius!" I cried.

"'Ee's got no names, no addresses, no car number, no nothin'," he said.

"You're brilliant!"

"I think you'd better pull off this main road as soon as possible," he said.

"Then we'd better build a little bonfire and burn these books."

"You're a fantastic fellow!" I exclaimed.

"Thank you, guv'nor," he said. "It's always nice to be appreciated."

The Surgeon

"YOU have done extraordinarily well," Robert Sandy said, seating himself behind the desk. "It's altogether a splendid recovery. I don't think there's any need for you to come and see me any more."

The patient finished putting on his clothes and said to the surgeon, "May I speak to you, please, for another moment?"

"Of course you may," Robert Sandy said. "Take a seat."

The man sat down opposite the surgeon and leaned forward, placing his hands, palms downward, on the top of the desk. "I suppose you still refuse to take a fee?" he said.

"I've never taken one yet and I don't propose to change my ways at this time of life," Robert Sandy told him pleasantly. "I work entirely for the National Health Service and they pay me a very fair salary."

Robert Sandy MA, M. CHIR, FRCs, had been at The Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford for eighteen years and he was now fifty-two years old, with a wife and three grown-up children. Unlike many of his colleagues, he did not hanker after fame and riches. He was basically a simple man utterly devoted to his profession.

It was now seven weeks since his patient, a university undergraduate, had been rushed into Casualty by ambulance after a nasty car accident in the Banbury Road not far from the hospital. He was suffering from massive abdominal injuries and he had lost consciousness. When the call came through from Casualty for an emergency surgeon, Robert Sandy was up in his office having a cup of tea after a fairly arduous morning's work which had included a gall-bladder, a prostate and a total colostomy, but for some reason he happened to be the only general surgeon available at that moment. He took one more sip of his tea, then walked straight back into the operating theatre and started scrubbing up all over again.

After three and a half hours on the operating table, the patient was still alive and Robert Sandy had done everything he could to save his life. The next day, to the surgeon's considerable surprise, the man was showing signs that he was going to survive. In addition, his mind was lucid and he was speaking coherently. It was only then, on the morning after the operation, that Robert Sandy began to realize that he had an important person on his hands. Three dignified gentlemen from the Saudi Arabian Embassy, including the Ambassador himself, came into the hospital and the first thing they wanted was to call in all manner of celebrated surgeons from Harley Street to advise on the case. The patient, with bottles suspended all round his bed and tubes running into many parts of his body, shook his head and murmured something in Arabic to the Ambassador.

"He says he wants only you to look after him," the Ambassador said to Robert Sandy.

"You are very welcome to call in anyone else you choose for consultation," Robert Sandy said.

"Not if he doesn't want us to," the Ambassador said. "He says you have saved his life and he has absolute faith in you. We must respect his wishes."

The Ambassador then told Robert Sandy that his patient was none other than a prince of royal blood. In other words, he was one of the many sons of the present King of Saudi Arabia.

A few days later, when the Prince was off the danger list, the Embassy tried once again to persuade him to make a change. They wanted him to be moved to a far more luxurious hospital that catered only for private patients, but the Prince would have none of it. "I stay here," he said, "with the surgeon who saved my life."

Robert Sandy was touched by the confidence his patient was putting in him, and throughout the long weeks of recovery, he did his best to ensure that this confidence was not misplaced.

And now, in the consulting-room, the Prince was saying, "I do wish you would allow me to pay you for all you have done, Mr Sandy." The young man had spent three years at Oxford and he knew very well that in England a surgeon was always addressed as 'Mister' and not 'Doctor'. "Please let me pay you, Mr Sandy," he said.

Robert Sandy shook his head. "I'm sorry," he answered, "but I still have to say no. It's just a personal rule of mine and I won't break it."

"But dash it all, you saved my life," the Prince said, tapping the palms of his hands on the desk.

"I did no more than any other competent surgeon would have done," Robert Sandy said.

The Prince took his hands off the desk and clasped them on his lap. "All right, Mr Sandy, even though you refuse a fee, there is surely no reason why my father should not give you a small present to show his gratitude."

Robert Sandy shrugged his shoulders. Grateful patients quite often gave him a case of whisky or a dozen bottles of wine and he accepted these things gracefully. He never expected them, but he was awfully pleased when they arrived. It was a nice way of saying thank you.

The Prince took from his jacket pocket a small pouch made of black velvet and he pushed it across the desk. "My father," he said, "has asked me to tell you how enormously indebted he is to you for what you have done. He told me that whether you took a fee or not, I was to make sure you accepted this little gift."

Robert Sandy looked suspiciously at the black pouch, but he made no move to take it.

"My father," the Prince went on, "said also to tell you that in his eyes my life is without price and that nothing on earth can repay you adequately for having saved it. This is simply a what shall we call it... a present for your next birthday. A small birthday present."

"He shouldn't give me anything," Robert Sandy said.

"Look at it, please," the Prince said.

Rather gingerly, the surgeon picked up the pouch and loosened the silk thread at the opening. When he tipped it upside down, there was a flash of brilliant light as something icewhite dropped on to the plain wooden desk-top. The stone was about the size of a cashew nut or a bit larger, perhaps three-quarters of an inch long from end to end, and it was pear shaped, with a very sharp point at the narrow end. Its many facets glimmered and sparkled in the most wonderful way.

"Good gracious me," Robert Sandy said, looking at it but not yet touching it. "What is it?"

"It's a diamond," the prince said. "Pure white. It's not especially large, but the colour is good."

"I really can't accept a present like this," Robert Sandy said. "No, it wouldn't be right. It must be quite valuable."

The Prince smiled at him. "I must tell you something, Mr Sandy," he said. "Nobody refuses a gift from the King. It would be a terrible insult. It has never been done."

Robert Sandy looked back at the Prince. "Oh dear," he said. "You are making it awkward for me, aren't you?"

"It is not awkward at all," the Prince said. "Just take it."

"You could give it to the hospital."

"We have already made a donation to the hospital," the Prince said. "Please take it, not just for my father, but for me as well."

"You are very kind," Robert Sandy said. "All right, then. But I feel quite embarrassed." He picked up the diamond and placed it in the palm of one hand. "There's never been a diamond in our family before," he said. "Gosh, it is beautiful, isn't it. You must please convey my thanks to His Majesty and tell him I shall always treasure it."

"You don't actually have to hang on to it," the Prince said. "My father would not be in the least offended if you were to sell it. Who knows, one day you might need a little pocket-money."

"I don't think I shall sell it," Robert Sandy said. "It is too lovely. Perhaps I shall have it made into a pendant for my wife."

"What a nice idea," the Prince said, getting up from his chair. "And please remember what I told you before. You and your wife are invited to my country at any time. My father would be happy to welcome you both."

"That's very good of him," Robert Sandy said. "I won't forget."

When the Prince had gone, Robert Sandy picked up the diamond again and examined it with total fascination. It was dazzling in its beauty, and as he moved it gently from side to side in his palm, one facet after the other caught the light from the window and flashed brilliantly with blue and pink and gold. He glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes past three. An idea had come to him. He picked up the telephone and asked his secretary if there was

anything else urgent for him to do that afternoon. If there wasn't, he told her, then he thought he might leave early.

"There's nothing that can't wait until Monday," the secretary said, sensing that for once this most hard-working of men had some special reason for wanting to go.

"I've got a few things of my own I'd very much like to do."

"Off you go, Mr Sandy," she said. "Try to get some rest over the weekend. I'll see you on Monday."

In the hospital car park, Robert Sandy unchained his bicycle, mounted and rode out on to the Woodstock Road. He still bicycled to work every day unless the weather was foul. It kept him in shape and it also meant his wife could have the car. There was nothing odd about that. Half the population of Oxford rode on bicycles. He turned into the Woodstock Road and headed for The High. The only good jeweller in town had his shop in The High, halfway up on the right and he was called H. F. Gold. It said so above the window, and most people knew that H stood for Harry. Harry Gold had been there a long time, but Robert had only been inside once, years ago, to buy a small bracelet for his daughter as a confirmation present.

He parked his bike against the curb outside the shop and went in. A woman behind the counter asked if she could help him.

"Is Mr Gold in?" Robert Sandy said.

"Yes, he is."

"I would like to see him privately for a few minutes, if I may. My name is Sandy."

"Just a minute, please." The woman disappeared through a door at the back, but in thirty seconds she returned and said, "Will you come this way, please."

Robert Sandy walked into a large untidy office in which a small, oldish man was seated behind a partner's desk. He wore a grey goatee beard and steel spectacles, and he stood up as Robert approached him.

"Mr Gold, my name is Robert Sandy. I am a surgeon at The Radcliffe. I wonder if you can help me."

"I'll do my best, Mr Sandy. Please sit down."

"Well, it's an odd story," Robert Sandy said. "I recently operated on one of the Saudi princes. He's in his third year at Magdalen and he'd been involved in a nasty car accident. And now he has given me, or rather his father has given me, a fairly wonderful-looking diamond."

"Good gracious me," Mr Gold said. "How very exciting."

"I didn't want to accept it, but I'm afraid it was more or less forced on me."

"And you would like me to look at it?"

"Yes, I would. You see, I haven't the faintest idea whether it's worth fi

ve hundred pounds or five thousand, and it's only sensible that I should know roughly what the value is."

"Of course you should," Harry Gold said. "I'll be glad to help you. Doctors at the Radcliffe have helped me a great deal over the years."

Robert Sandy took the black pouch out of his pocket and placed it on the desk. Harry Gold opened the pouch and tipped the diamond into his hand. As the stone fell into his palm, there was a moment when the old man appeared to freeze. His whole body became motionless as he sat there staring at the brilliant shining thing that lay before him. Slowly, he stood up. He walked over to the window and held the stone so that daylight fell upon it. He turned it over with one finger. He didn't say a word. His expression never changed. Still holding the diamond, he returned to his desk and from a drawer he took out a single sheet of clean white paper. He made a loose fold in the paper and placed the diamond in the fold. Then he returned to the window and stood there for a full minute studying the diamond that lay in the fold of paper.

"I am looking at the colour," he said at last. "That's the first thing to do. One always does that against a fold of white paper and preferably in a north light."

"Is that a north light?"

"Yes, it is. This stone is a wonderful colour, Mr Sandy. As fine a D colour as I've ever seen. In the trade, the very best quality white is called a D colour. In some places it's called a River. That's mostly in Scandinavia. A layman would call it a Blue White."

"It doesn't look very blue to me," Robert Sandy said.

"The purest whites always contain a trace of blue," Harry Gold said. "That's why in the old days they always put a blue-bag into the washing water. It made the clothes whiter."

"Ah yes, of course."

Harry Gold went back to his desk and took out from another drawer a sort of hooded magnifying glass. "This is a ten-times loupe," he said, holding it up. "What did you call it?"

"A loupe. It is simply a jeweller's magnifier. With this, I can examine the stone for imperfections."

Back once again at the window, Harry Gold began a minute examination of the diamond through the ten-times loupe, holding the paper with the stone on it in one hand and the loupe in the other. This process took maybe four minutes. Robert Sandy watched him and kept quiet.

"So far as I can see," Harry Gold said, "it is completely flawless. It really is a most lovely stone. The quality is superb and the cutting is very fine, though definitely not modern."

"Approximately how many facets would there be on a diamond like that?"

" Robert Sandy asked.

"Fifty-eight."

"You mean you know exactly?"

"Yes, I know exactly."

"Good Lord. And what roughly would you say it is worth?"

"A diamond like this," Harry Gold said, taking it from the paper and placing it in his palm, "a D colour stone of this size and clarity would command on enquiry a trade price of between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars a carat. In the shops it would cost you double that. Up to sixty thousand dollars a carat in the retail market."

"Great Scott!" Robert Sandy cried, jumping up. The little jeweller's words seemed to have lifted him clean out of his seat. He stood there, stunned.

"And now," Harry Gold was saying, "we must find out precisely how many carats it weighs." He crossed over to a shelf on which there stood a small metal apparatus. "This is simply an electronic scale," he said. He slid back a glass door and placed the diamond inside. He twiddled a couple of knobs, then he read off the figures on a dial. "It weighs fifteen point two seven carats," he said. "And that, in case it interests you, makes it worth about half a million dollars in the trade and over one million dollars if you bought it in a shop."

"You are making me nervous," Robert Sandy said, laughing nervously.

"If I owned it," Harry Gold said, "it would make me nervous. Sit down again, Mr Sandy, so you don't faint."

Robert Sandy sat down.

Harry Gold took his time settling himself into his chair behind the big partner's desk. "This is quite an occasion, Mr Sandy," he said. "I don't often have the pleasure of giving someone quite such a startlingly wonderful shock as this. I think I'm enjoying it more than you are."

"I am too shocked to be really enjoying it yet," Robert Sandy said. "Give me a moment or two to recover."

"Mind you," Harry Gold said, "one wouldn't expect much less from the King of the Saudis. Did you save the young prince's life?"

"I suppose I did, yes."

"Then that explains it." Harry Gold had put the diamond back on to the fold of white paper on his desk, and he sat there looking at it with the eyes of a man who loved what he saw. "My guess is that this stone came from the treasure-chest of old King Ibn Saud of Arabia. If that is the case, then it will be totally unknown in the trade, which makes it even more desirable. Are you going to sell it?"

"Oh gosh, I don't know what I am going to do with it," Robert Sandy said.

"It's all so sudden and confusing."

"May I give you some advice."

"Please do."

"If you are going to sell it, you should take it to auction. An unseen stone like this would attract a lot of interest, and the wealthy private buyers would be sure to come in and bid against the trade. And if you were able to reveal its provenance as well, telling them that it came directly from the Saudi Royal Family, then the price would go through the roof."

"You have been more than kind to me," Robert Sandy said. "When I do decide to sell it, I shall come first of all to you for advice. But tell me, does a diamond really cost twice as much in the shops as it does in the trade?"

"I shouldn't be telling you this," Harry Gold said, "but I'm afraid it does."

"So if you buy one in Bond Street or anywhere else like that, you are actually paying twice its intrinsic worth?"

"That's more or less right. A lot of young ladies have received nasty shocks when they've tried to re-sell jewellery that has been given to them by gentlemen."

"So diamonds are not a girl's best friend?"

"They are still very friendly things to have," Harry Gold said, "as you have just found out. But they are not generally a good investment for the amateur."

Outside in The High, Robert Sandy mounted his bicycle and headed for home. He was feeling totally light headed. It was as though he had just finished a whole bottle of good wine all by himself. Here he was, solid old Robert Sandy, sedate and sensible cycling through the streets of Oxford with more than half a million dollars in the pocket of his old tweed jacket! It was madness. But it was true.

He arrived back at his house in Acacia Road at about half past four and parked his bike in the garage alongside the car. Suddenly he found himself running along the little concrete path that led to the front door. "Now stop that!" he said aloud, pulling up short. "Calm down. You've got to make this really good for Betty. Unfold it slowly." But oh, he simply could not wait to give the news to his lovely wife and watch her face as he told her the whole story of his afternoon. He found her in the kitchen packing some jars of home-made jam into a basket.

"Robert!" she cried, delighted as always to see him. "You're home early! How nice!"

He kissed her and said, "I am a bit early, aren't I?"

"You haven't forgotten we're going to the Renshaws for the weekend? We have to leave fairly soon."

"I had forgotten," he said. "Or maybe I hadn't. Perhaps that's why I'm home early."

"I thought I'd take Margaret some jam."

"Good," he said. "Very good. You take her some jam. That's a very good

idea to take Margaret some jam."

There was something in the way he was acting that made her swing round and stare at him. "Robert," she said, "what's happened? There's something t he matter."

"Pour us each a drink," he said. "I've got a bit of news for you."

"Oh darling, it's not something awful, is it?"

"No," he said. "It's something funny. I think you'll like it."

"You've been made Head of Surgery!"

"It's funnier than that," he said. "Go on, make a good stiff drink for each o f us and sit down and I'll tell you."

"It's a bit early for drinks," she said, but she got the ice-tray from th e fridge and started making his whisky and soda. While she was doing this, sh e kept glancing up at him nervously. She said, "I don't think I've ever seen you quite like this before. You are wildly excited about something and you ar e pretending to be very calm. You're all red in the face. Are you sure it's g ood news?"

"I think it is," he said, "but I'll let you judge that for yourself." He sat down at the kitchen table and watched her as she put the glass of whisky in fro nt of him. "All right," she said. "Come on. Let's have it."

"Get a drink for yourself first," he said.

"My goodness, what is this?" she said, but she poured some gin into a gla ss and was reaching for the ice-tray when he said, "More than that. Give your self a good stiff one."

"Now I am worried," she said, but she did as she was told and then added i ce and filled the glass up with tonic. "Now then," she said, sitting down besi de him at the table, "get it off your chest."

Robert began telling his story. He started with the Prince in the consult ing-room and he spun it out long and well so that it took a good ten minutes before he came to the diamond.

"It must be quite a whopper," she said, "to make you go all red in the fa ce and funny-looking."

He reached into his pocket and took out the little black pouch and put it o n the table. "There it is," he said. "What do you think?"

She loosened the silk cord and tipped the stone into her hand. "Oh, my Go d!" she cried. "It's absolutely stunning!"

"It is, isn't it."

"It's amazing."

"I haven't told you the whole story yet," he said, and while his wife ro lled the diamond from the palm of one hand to the other, he went on to tell her about his visit to Harry Gold in The High. When he came to the point whe re the jeweller began to talk about value, he stopped and said, "So what do you think he said it was worth?"

"Something pretty big," she said. "It's bound to be. I mean just look at it!"

"Go on then, make a guess. How much?"

"Ten thousand pounds," she said. "I really don't have any idea."

"Try again."

"You mean, it's more?"

"Yes, it's quite a lot more."

"Twenty thousand pounds!"

"Would you be thrilled if it was worth as much as that?"

"Of course, I would, darling. Is it really worth twenty thousand pounds?"

"Yes," he said. "And the rest."

"Now don't be a beast, Robert. Just tell me what Mr Gold said."

"Take another drink of gin."

She did so, then put down the glass, looking at him and waiting.

"It is worth at least half a million dollars and very probably over a million

."

"You're joking!" Her words came out in a kind of gasp.

"It's known as a pear-shape," he said. "And where it comes to a point at this end, it's as sharp as a needle."

"I'm completely stunned," she said, still gasping.

"You wouldn't have thought half a million, would you?"

"I've never in my life had to think in those sort of figures," she said.

She stood up and went over to him and gave him a huge hug and a kiss. "You really are the most wonderful and stupendous man in the world!" she cried.

"I was totally bowled over," he said. "I still am."

"Oh Robert!" she cried, gazing at him with eyes bright as two stars. "Do you realize what this means? It means we can get Diana and her husband out of that horrid little flat and buy them a small house!"

"By golly, you're right!"

"And we can buy a decent flat for John and give him a better allowance all the way through his medical school! And Ben... Ben wouldn't have to go on a motor-bike to work all through the freezing winters. We could get him something better. And... and... and..

"And what?" he asked, smiling at her.

"And you and I can take a really good holiday for once and go wherever we please! We can go to Egypt and Turkey and you can visit Baalbek and all the other places you've been longing to go to for years and years!" She was quite breathless with the vista of small pleasures that were unfolding in her dreams. "And you can start collecting some really nice pieces for once in your life as well!"

Ever since he had been a student, Robert Sandy's passion had been the history of the Mediterranean countries, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Syria and E

gypt, and he had made himself into something of an expert on the ancient world of those various civilizations. He had done it by reading and studying and by visiting, when he had the time, the British Museum and the Ashmolean. But with three children to educate and with a job that paid only a reasonable salary, he had never been able to indulge this passion as he would have liked. He wanted above all to visit some of the grand remote regions of Asia Minor and also the now below-ground village of Babylon in Iraq and he would love to see the Arch of Ctsephon and the Sphinx at Memphis and a hundred other things and places, but neither the time nor the money had ever been available. Even so, the long coffee-table in the living-room was covered with small objects and fragments that he had managed to pick up cheaply here and there through his life. There was a mysterious pale alabaster ushaptiu in the form of a mummy from Upper Egypt which he knew was Pre-Dynastic from about 7000 BC. There was a bronze bowl from Lydia with an engraving on it of a horse, and an early Byzantine twisted silver necklace, and a section of a wooden painted mask from an Egyptian sarcophagus, and a Roman red-ware bowl, and a small black Etruscan dish, and perhaps fifty other fragile and interesting little pieces. None was particularly valuable, but Robert Sandy loved them all.

"Wouldn't that be marvellous?" his wife was saying. "Where shall we go first?"

"Turkey," he said.

"Listen," she said, pointing to the diamond that lay sparkling on the kitchen table, "you'd better put your fortune away somewhere safe before you lose it."

"Today is Friday," he said. "When do we get back from the Renshaws?"

"Sunday night."

"And what are we going to do with our million-pound rock in the meanwhile? Take it with us in my pocket?"

"No." she said, "that would be silly. You really cannot walk around with a million pounds in your pocket for a whole weekend. It's got to go into a safe-deposit box at the bank. We should do it now."

"It's Friday night, my darling. All the banks are closed till next Monday."

"So they are," she said. "Well then, we'd better hide it somewhere in the house."

"The house will be empty till we come back," he said. "I don't think that's a very good idea."

"It's better than carrying it around in your pocket or in my handbag."

"I'm not leaving it in the house. An empty house is always liable to be burgled."

"Come on, darling," she said, "surely we can think of a place where no one could possibly find it."

"In the tea-pot," he said.

"Or bury it in the sugar-basin," she said.

"Or put it in the bowl of one of my pipes in the pipe-rack," he said. "With some tobacco over it."

"Or under the soil of the azalea plant," she said.

"Hey, that's not bad, Betty. That's the best so far." They sat at the kitchen table with the shining stone lying there between them, wondering very seriously what to do with it for the next two days while they were away.

"I still think it's best if I take it with me," he said.

"I don't, Robert. You'll be feeling in your pocket every five minutes to make sure it's still there. You won't relax for one moment."

"I suppose you're right," he said. "Very well, then. Shall we bury it under the soil of the azalea plant in the sitting-room? No one's going to look there."

"It's not one hundred percent safe," she said. "Someone could knock the pot over and the soil would spill out on the floor and presto, there's a sparkling diamond lying there."

"It's a thousand to one against that," he said. "It's a thousand to one against the house being broken into anyway."

"No, it's not," she said. "Houses are being burgled every day. It's not worth chancing it. But look, darling, I'm not going to let this thing become a nuisance to you, or a worry."

"I agree with that," he said.

They sipped their drinks for a while in silence.

"I've got it!" she cried, leaping up from her chair. "I've thought of a marvelous place!"

"Where?"

"In here," she cried, picking up the ice-tray and pointing to one of the empty compartments. "We'll just drop it in here and fill it with water and put it back in the fridge. In an hour or two it'll be hidden inside a solid block of ice and even if you looked, you wouldn't be able to see it."

Robert Sandy stared at the ice-tray. "It's fantastic!" he said. "You're a genius! Let's do it right away!"

"Shall we really do it?"

"Of course. It's a terrific idea."

She picked up the diamond and placed it into one of the little empty compartments. She went to the sink and carefully filled the whole tray with water. She opened the door of the freezer section of the fridge and slid the tray in.

"It's the top tray on the left," she said. "We'd better remember that. And it'll be in the block of ice furthest away on the right hand side of the tray."

"The top tray on the left," he said. "Got it. I feel better now that it's tucked safely away."

"Finish your drink, darling," she said. "Then we must be off. I've packed your case for you. And we'll try not to think about our million pounds any more until we come back."

"Do we talk about it to other people?" he asked her. "Like the Renshaws or anyone else who might be there?"

"I wouldn't," she said. "It's such an incredible story that it would soon spread around all over the place. Next thing you know, it would be in the papers."

"I don't think the King of the Saudis would like that," he said.

"Nor do I. So let's say nothing at the moment."

"I agree," he said. "I would hate any kind of publicity."

"You'll be able to get yourself a new car," she said, laughing.

"So I will. I'll get one for you, too. What kind would you like, darling?"

"I'll think about it," she said.

Soon after that, the two of them drove off to the Renshaws for the weekend. It wasn't far, just beyond Whitney, some thirty minutes from their own house. Charlie Renshaw was a consultant physician at the hospital and the families had known each other for many years.

The weekend was pleasant and uneventful, and on Sunday evening Robert and Betty Sandy drove home again, arriving at the house in Acacia Road at about seven pm. Robert took the two small suitcases from the car and they walked up the path together. He unlocked the front door and held it open for his wife.

"I'll make some scrambled eggs," she said, "and crispy bacon. Would you like a drink first, darling?"

"Why not?" he said.

He closed the door and was about to carry the suitcases upstairs when he heard a piercing scream from the sitting-room "Oh no!,, she was crying. "No! No! No!"

Robert dropped the suitcase and rushed in after her. She was standing there pressing her hands to her cheeks and already tears were streaming down her face.

The scene in the sitting-room was one of utter desolation. The curtains were drawn and they seemed to be the only things that remained intact in the room. Everything else had been smashed to smithereens. All Robert Sandy's precious little objects from the coffee-table had been picked up and flung against the walls and were lying in tiny pieces on the carpet. A glass cabinet had been tipped over. A chest-of-drawers had had its four drawers pulled out and the contents, photograph albums, games of Scrabble and Monopoly and a chessboard and chessmen and many other family things had been flung across the room. Every single book had been pulled out of the big floor-to-

ceiling bookshelves against the far wall and piles of them were now lying open and mutilated all over the place. The glass on each of the four watercolours had been smashed and the oil painting of their three children painted when they were young had had its canvas slashed many times with a knife. The armchairs and the sofa had also been slashed so that the stuffing was bulging out. Virtually everything in the room except the curtains and the carpet had been destroyed.

"Oh, Robert," she said, collapsing into his arms, "I don't think I can stand this."

He didn't say anything. He felt physically sick.

"Stay here," he said. "I'm going to look upstairs." He ran out and took the stairs two at a time and went first to their bedroom. It was the same in there. The drawers had been pulled out and the shirts and blouses and underclothes were now scattered everywhere. The bedclothes had been stripped from the double-bed and even the mattress had been tipped off the bed and slashed many times with a knife. The cupboards were open and every dress and suit and every pair of trousers and every jacket and every skirt had been ripped from its hanger. He didn't look in the other bedrooms. He ran downstairs and put an arm around his wife's shoulders and together they picked their way through the debris of the sitting-room towards the kitchen. There they stopped.

The mess in the kitchen was indescribable. Almost every single container of any sort in the entire room had been emptied on to the floor and then smashed to pieces. The place was a waste-land of broken jars and bottles and food of every kind. All Betty's home-made jams and pickles and bottled fruits had been swept from the long shelf and lay shattered on the ground. The same had happened to the stuff in the store-cupboard, the mayonnaise, the ketchup, the vinegar, the olive oil, the vegetable oil and all the rest. There were two other long shelves on the far wall and on these had stood about twenty lovely large glass jars with big groundglass stoppers in which were kept rice and flour and brown sugar and bran and oatmeal and all sorts of other things. Every jar now lay on the floor in many pieces, with the contents spewed around. The refrigerator door was open and the things that had been inside, the leftover foods, the milk, the eggs, the butter, the yoghurt, the tomatoes, the lettuce, all of them had been pulled out and splashed on to the pretty tiled kitchen floor. The inner drawers of the fridge had been thrown into the mass of slush and trampled on. The plastic ice-trays had been yanked out and each had been literally broken in two and thrown aside. Even the plastic-coated shelves had been ripped out of the fridge and bent double and thrown down with the rest. All the bottles of drink, the whisky, gin, vodka, sherry, vermouth, as well as half a dozen cans of beer, were standing on the table, empty. The bottles of drink and the beer cans seemed to be the only th

ings in the entire house that had not been smashed. Practically the whole floor lay under a thick layer of mush and goo. It was as if a gang of mad children had been told to see how much mess they could make and had succeeded brilliantly.

Robert and Betty Sandy stood on the edge of it all, speechless with horror. At last Robert said, "I imagine our lovely diamond is somewhere underneath all that."

"I don't give a damn about our diamond," Betty said. "I'd like to kill the people who did this."

"So would I," Robert said. "I've got to call the police." He went back in to the sitting-room and picked up the telephone. By some miracle it still worked.

The first squad car arrived in a few minutes. It was followed over the next half-hour by a Police Inspector, a couple of plain-clothes men, a finger-print expert and a photographer. The Inspector had a black moustache and a short muscular body. "These are not professional thieves," he told Robert Sandy after he had taken a look round. "They weren't even amateur thieves. They were simply hooligans off the street. Riff-raff. Yobbos. Probably three of them. People like this scout around looking for an empty house and when they find it they break in and the first thing they do is to hunt out the booze. Did you have much alcohol on the premises?"

"The usual stuff," Robert said. "Whisky, gin, vodka, sherry and a few cans of beer."

"They'll have drunk the lot," the Inspector said. "Lads like these have only two things in mind, drink and destruction. They collect all the booze on to a table and sit down and drink themselves raving mad. Then they go on the rampage."

"You mean they didn't come in here to steal?" Robert asked.

"I doubt they've stolen anything at all," the Inspector said. "If they'd been thieves they would at least have taken your TV set. Instead, they smashed it up."

"But why do they do this?"

"You'd better ask their parents," the Inspector said. "They're rubbish, that's all they are, just rubbish. People aren't brought up right any more these days."

Then Robert told the Inspector about the diamond. He gave him all the details from the beginning to end because he realized that from the police point of view it was likely to be the most important part of the whole business.

"Half a million quid!" cried the Inspector. "Jesus Christ!"

"Probably double that," Robert said.

"Then that's the first thing we look for," the Inspector said.

"I personally do not propose to go down on my hands and knees grubbing ar

ound in that pile of slush," Robert said. "I don't feel like it at this moment."

"Leave it to us," the Inspector said. "We'll find it. That was a clever place to hide it."

"My wife thought of it. But tell me, Inspector, if by some remote chance they had found it..."

"Impossible," the Inspector said. "How could they?"

"They might have seen it lying on the floor after the ice had melted," Robert said. "I agree it's unlikely. But if they had spotted it, would they have taken it?"

"I think they would; the Inspector said." No one can resist a diamond. It has a sort of magnetism about it. Yes, if one of them had seen it on the floor, I think he would have slipped it into his pocket. But don't worry about it, doctor. It'll turn up."

"I'm not worrying about it," Robert said. "Right now, I'm worrying about my wife and about our house. My wife spent years trying to make this place into a good home."

"Now look, sir," the Inspector said, "the thing for you to do tonight is to take your wife off to a hotel and get some rest. Come back tomorrow, both of you, and we'll start sorting things out. There'll be someone here all the time looking after the house."

"I have to operate at the hospital first thing in the morning," Robert said. "But I expect my wife will try to come along."

"Good," the Inspector said. "It's a nasty upsetting business having your house ripped apart like this. It's a big shock. I've seen it many times. It hits you very hard."

Robert and Betty Sandy stayed the night at Oxford's Randolph Hotel, and by eight o'clock the following morning Robert was in the Operating Theatre at the hospital, beginning to work his way through his morning list.

Shortly after noon, Robert had finished his last operation, a straightforward non-malignant prostate on an elderly male. He removed his rubber gloves and mask and went next door to the surgeons' small rest-room for a cup of coffee. But before he got his coffee, he picked up the telephone and called his wife.

"How are you, darling?" he said.

"Oh Robert, it's so awful," she said. "I just don't know where to begin."

"Have you called the insurance company?"

"Yes, they're coming any moment to help me make a list."

"Good," he said. "And have the police found our diamond?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "They've been through every bit of that slush in the kitchen and they swear it's not there."

"Then where can it have gone? Do you think the vandals found it?"

"I suppose they must have," she said. "When they broke those ice-trays all the ice-cubes would have fallen out. They fall out when you just bend the tray. They're meant to."

"They still wouldn't have spotted it in the ice," Robert said.

"They would when the ice melted," she said. "Those men must have been in the house for hours. Plenty of time for it to melt."

"I suppose you're right."

"It would stick out a mile lying there on the floor," she said, "the way it shines."

"Oh dear," Robert said.

"If we never get it back we won't miss it much anyway, darling," she said. "We only had it a few hours."

"I agree," he said. "Do the police have any leads on who the vandals were?"

"Not a clue," she said. "They found lots of finger-prints, but they don't seem to belong to any known criminals."

"They wouldn't," he said, "not if they were hooligans off the street."

"That's what the Inspector said."

"Look, darling," he said, "I've just about finished here for the morning. I'm going to grab some coffee, then I'll come home to give you a hand."

"Good," she said. "I need you, Robert. I need you badly."

"Just give me five minutes to rest my feet," he said, "I feel exhausted." **

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In Number Two Operating Theatre not ten yards away, another senior surgeon called Brian Goff was also nearly finished for the morning. He was on his last patient, a young man who had a piece of bone lodged somewhere in his small intestine. Goff was being assisted by a rather jolly young Registrar named William Haddock, and between them they had opened the patient's abdomen and Goff was lifting out a section of the small intestine and feeling along it with his fingers. It was routine stuff and there was a good deal of conversation going on in the room.

"Did I ever tell you about the man who had lots of little live fish in his bladder?" William Haddock was saying.

"I don't think you did," Goff said.

"When we were students at Barts," William Haddock said, "we were being taught by a particularly unpleasant Professor of Urology. One day, this twit was going to demonstrate how to examine the bladder using a cystoscope. The patient was an old man suspected of having stones. Well now, in one of the hospital waiting-rooms, there was an aquarium that was full of those tiny little fish, neons they're called, brilliant colours, and one of the students sucked up about twenty of them into a syringe and managed to inject them into the patient's bladder when he was under his premed, before he was t

aken up to Theatre for his cystoscopy."

"That's disgusting!" the theatre sister cried. "You can stop right there, Mr Haddock!" Brian Goff smiled behind his mask and said, "What happened next?" As he spoke, he had about three feet of the patient's small intestine lying on the green sterile sheet, and he was still feeling along it with his fingers.

"When the Professor got the cystoscope into the bladder and put his eye to it," William Haddock said, "he started jumping up and down and shouting with excitement.

"What is it, sir?" the guilty student asked him. "What do you see?"

"It's fish!" cried the Professor. "There's hundreds of little fish! They're swimming about!"

"You made it up," the theatre sister said. "It's not true."

"It most certainly is true," the Registrar said. "I looked down the cystoscope myself and saw the fish. And they were actually swimming about."

"We might have expected a fishy story from a man with a name like Haddock," Goff said. "Here we are," he added. "Here's this poor chap's trouble. You want to feel it?"

William Haddock took the pale grey piece of intestine between his fingers and pressed. "Yes," he said. "Got it."

"And if you look just there," Goff said, instructing him, "you can see where the bit of bone has punctured the mucosa. It's already inflamed."

Brian Goff held the section of intestine in the palm of his left hand. The sister handed him a scalpel and he made a small incision. The sister gave him a pair of forceps and Goff probed down amongst all the slushy matter of the intestine until he found the offending object. He brought it out, held firmly in the forceps, and dropped it into the small stainless-steel bowl the sister was holding. The thing was covered in pale brown gunge.

"That's it," Goff said. "You can finish this one for me now, can't you, William. I was meant to be at a meeting downstairs fifteen minutes ago."

"You go ahead," William Haddock said. "I'll close him up."

The senior surgeon hurried out of the Theatre and the Registrar proceeded to sew up, first the incision in the intestine, then the abdomen itself. The whole thing took no more than a few minutes.

"I'm finished," he said to the anaesthetist.

The man nodded and removed the mask from the patient's face.

"Thank you, sister," William Haddock said. "See you tomorrow." As he moved away, he picked up from the sister's tray the stainless-steel bowl that contained the gunge-covered brown object. "Ten to one it's a chicken bone," he said and he carried it to the sink and began rinsing it under the tap.

"Good God, what's this?" he cried. "Come and look, sister!"

The sister came over to look. "It's a piece of costume jewellery," she s

aid. "Probably part of a necklace. Now how on earth did he come to swallow that hat?"

"He'd have passed it if it hadn't had such a sharp point," William Haddock said. "I think I'll give it to my girlfriend."

"You can't do that, Mr Haddock," the sister said. "It belongs to the patient. Hang on a sec. Let me look at it again." She took the stone from William Haddock's gloved hand and carried it into the powerful light that hung over the operating table. The patient had now been lifted off the table and was being wheeled out into Recovery next door, accompanied by the anaesthetist.

"Come here, Mr Haddock," the sister said, and there was an edge of excitement in her voice. William Haddock joined her under the light. "This is amazing," she went on. "Just look at the way it sparkles and shines. A bit of glass wouldn't do that."

"Maybe it's rock-crystal," William Haddock said, "or topaz, one of those semi-precious stones."

"You know what I think," the sister said. "I think it's a diamond."

"Don't be damn silly," William Haddock said.

A junior nurse was wheeling away the instrument trolley and a male theatre assistant was helping to clear up. Neither of them took any notice of the young surgeon and the sister. The sister was about twenty-eight years old, and now that she had removed her mask she appeared as an extremely attractive young lady.

"It's easy enough to test it," William Haddock said. "See if it cuts glass." Together they crossed over to the frosted-glass window of the operating room. The sister held the stone between finger and thumb and pressed the sharp pointed end against the glass and drew it downward. There was a fierce scraping crunch as the point bit into the glass and left a deep line two inches long.

"Jesus Christ!" William Haddock said. "It is a diamond!"

"If it is, it belongs to the patient," the sister said firmly.

"Maybe it does," William Haddock said, "but he was mighty glad to get rid of it. Hold on a moment. Where are his notes?" He hurried over to the side table and picked up a folder which said on it JOHN DIGGS. He opened the folder. In it there was an Xray of the patient's intestine accompanied by the radiologist's report. John Diggs, the report said. Age 17. Address 123 Mayfield Road, Oxford. There is clearly a large obstruction of some sort in the upper small intestine. The patient has no recollection of swallowing anything unusual, but says that he ate some fried chicken on Sunday evening. The object clearly has a sharp point that has pierced the mucosa of the intestine, and it could be a piece of bone...

"How could he swallow a thing like that without knowing it?" William Haddock said.

"It doesn't make sense," the sister said.

"There's no question it's a diamond after the way it cut the glass," William Haddock said. "Do you agree?"

"Absolutely," the sister said.

"And a bloody big one at that," Haddock said. "The question is, how good a diamond is it? How much is it worth?"

"We'd better send it to the lab right away," the sister said.

"To hell with the lab," Haddock said. "Let's have a bit of fun and do it ourselves."

"How?"

"We'll take it to Golds, the jewellers in The High. They'll know. The damn thing must be worth a fortune. We're not going to steal it, but we're damn well going to find out about it. Are you game?"

"Do you know anyone at Golds?" the sister said.

"No, but that doesn't matter. Do you have a car?"

"My Mini's in the car park."

"Right. Get changed. I'll meet you out there. It's about your lunch time anyway. I'll take the stone."

Twenty minutes later, at a quarter to one, the little Mini pulled up outside the jewellery shop of H. F. Gold and parked on the double-yellow lines.

"Who cares," William Haddock said. "We won't be long." He and the sister went into the shop.

There were two customers inside, a young man and a girl. They were examining a tray of rings and were being served by the woman assistant. As soon as they came in, the assistant pressed a bell under the counter and Harry Gold emerged through the door at the back. "Yes," he said to William Haddock and the sister. "Can I help you?"

"Would you mind telling us what this is worth?" William Haddock said, placing the stone on a piece of green cloth that lay on the counter.

Harry Gold stopped dead. He stared at the stone. Then he looked up at the young man and woman who stood before him. He was thinking very fast. Steady now, he told himself. Don't do anything silly. Act natural.

"Well well," he said as casually as he could. "That looks to me like a very fine diamond, a very fine diamond indeed. Would you mind waiting a moment while I weigh it and examine it carefully in my office. Then perhaps I'll be able to give you an accurate valuation. Do sit down, both of you."

Harry Gold scuttled back into his office with the diamond in his hand. Immediately, he took it to the electronic scale and weighed it. Fifteen point two seven carats. That was exactly the weight of Mr Robert Sandy's stone! He had been certain it was the same one the moment he saw it. Who could mistake a diamond like that? And now the weight had proved it. His instinct was to call the police right away, but he was a cautious man who did not li

ke making mistakes. Perhaps the doctor had already sold his diamond. Perhaps he had given it to his children. Who knows?

Quickly he picked up the Oxford telephone book. The Radcliffe Infirmary was Oxford 249891. He dialled it. He asked for Mr Robert Sandy. He got Robert's secretary. He told her it was most urgent that he speak to Mr Sandy this instant. The secretary said, "Hold on, please." She called the Operating Theatre. Mr Sandy had gone home half an hour ago, they told her. She took up the outside phone and relayed this information to Mr Gold.

"What's his home number?" Mr Gold asked her.

"Is this to do with a patient?"

"No!" cried Harry Gold. "It's to do with a robbery! For heaven's sake, woman, give me that number quickly!"

"Who is speaking, please?"

"Harry Gold! I'm the jeweller in The High! Don't waste time, I beg you!"

She gave him the number.

Harry Gold dialled again.

"Mr Sandy?"

"Speaking."

"This is Harry Gold, Mr Sandy, the jeweller. Have you by any chance lost your diamond?"

"Yes, I have."

"Two people have just brought it into my shop," Harry Gold whispered excitedly. "A man and a woman. Youngish. They're trying to get it valued. They're waiting out there now."

"Are you certain it's my stone?"

"Positive. I weighed it."

"Keep them there, Mr Gold!" Robert Sandy cried. "Talk to them! Humour them! Do anything! I'm calling the police!"

Robert Sandy called the police station. Within seconds, he was giving the news to the Detective Inspector who was in charge of the case. "Get there fast and you'll catch them both!" he said. "I'm on my way, too!"

"Come on, darling!" he shouted to his wife. "Jump in the car. I think they've found our diamond and the thieves are in Harry Gold's shop right now trying to sell it!"

When Robert and Betty Sandy drove up to Harry Gold's shop nine minutes later, two police cars were already parked outside. "Come on, darling," Robert said. "Let's go in and see what's happening."

There was a good deal of activity inside the shop when Robert and Betty Sandy rushed in. Two policemen and two plain-clothes detectives, one of them the Inspector, were surrounding a furious William Haddock and an even more furious theatre sister. Both the young surgeon and the theatre sister were handcuffed.

"You found it where?" the Inspector was saying.

"Take these damn handcuffs off me!" the sister was shouting. "How dare you do this!"

"Tell us again where you found it," the Inspector said, caustic.

"In someone's stomach!" William Haddock yelled back at him. "I've told you twice!"

"Don't give me that crap!" the Inspector said.

"Good God, William!" Robert Sandy cried as he came in and saw who it was. "And Sister Wyman! What on earth are you two doing here?"

"They had the diamond," the Inspector said. "They were trying to flog it. Do you know these people, Mr Sandy?"

It didn't take very long for William Haddock to explain to Robert Sandy, and indeed to the Inspector, exactly how and where the diamond had been found.

"Remove their handcuffs, for heaven's sake, Inspector," Robert Sandy said. "They're telling the truth. The man you want, at least one of the men you want, is in the hospital right now, just coming round from his anaesthetic. Isn't that right, William?"

"Correct," William Haddock said. "His name is John Diggs. He'll be in one of the surgical wards."

Harry Gold stepped forward. "Here's your diamond, Mr Sandy," he said.

"Now listen," the theatre sister said, still angry, "would someone for God's sake tell me how that patient came to swallow a diamond like this without knowing he'd done it?"

"I think I can guess," Robert Sandy said. "He allowed himself the luxury of putting ice in his drink. Then he got very drunk. Then he swallowed a piece of half-melted ice."

"I still don't get it," the sister said.

"I'll tell you the rest later," Robert Sandy said. "In fact, why don't we all go round the corner and have a drink ourselves."