

A lush forest scene featuring a log cabin with a gabled roof on the right. A large, moss-covered tree trunk stands prominently in the foreground on the left. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and ferns, with sunlight filtering through the dense canopy.

# SHORT STORY SUMMER CAMP 2024

A SIX-WEEK ONLINE CLASS  
ON SHORT FICTION

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# The Reluctant Dragon

Kenneth Grahame

Long ago—might have been hundreds of years ago—in a cottage half-way between this village and yonder shoulder of the Downs up there, a shepherd lived with his wife and their little son. Now the shepherd spent his days—and at certain times of the year his nights too—up on the wide ocean-bosom of the Downs, with only the sun and the stars and the sheep for company, and the friendly chattering world of men and women far out of sight and hearing. But his little son, when he wasn't helping his father, and often when he was as well, spent much of his time buried in big volumes that he borrowed from the affable gentry and interested parsons of the country round about. And his parents were very fond of him, and rather proud of him too, though they didn't let on in his hearing, so he was left to go his own way and read as much as he liked; and instead of frequently getting a cuff on the side of the head, as might very well have happened to him, he was treated more or less as an equal by his parents, who sensibly thought it a very fair division of labour that they should supply the practical knowledge, and he the book-learning. They knew that book-learning often came in useful at a pinch, in spite of what their neighbours said. What the Boy chiefly dabbled in was natural history and fairy-tales, and he just took them as they came, in a sandwichy sort of way, without making any distinctions; and really his course of reading strikes one as rather sensible.

One evening the shepherd, who for some nights past had been disturbed and preoccupied, and off his usual mental balance, came home all of a tremble, and, sitting down at the table where his wife and son were peacefully employed, she with her seam, he in following out the adventures of the Giant with no Heart in his Body, exclaimed with much agitation:

'It's all up with me, Maria! Never no more can I go up on them there Downs, was it ever so!'

'Now don't you take on like that,' said his wife, who was a very sensible woman: 'but tell us all about it first, whatever it is as has given you this shake-up, and then me and you and the son here, between us, we ought to be able to get to the bottom of it!'

‘It began some nights ago,’ said the shepherd. ‘You know that cave up there—I never liked it, somehow, and the sheep never liked it neither, and when sheep don’t like a thing there’s generally some reason for it. Well, for some time past there’s been faint noises coming from that cave—noises like heavy sighings, with grunts mixed up in them; and sometimes snoring, far away down—real snoring, yet somehow not honest snoring, like you and me o’ nights, you know!’

‘I know,’ remarked the Boy, quietly.

‘Of course I was terrible frightened,’ the shepherd went on; ‘yet somehow I couldn’t keep away. So this very evening, before I come down, I took a cast round by the cave, quietly. And there— O Lord! there I saw him at last, as plain as I see you!’

‘Saw who?’ said his wife, beginning to share in her husband’s nervous terror.

‘Why him, I’m a telling you!’ said the shepherd. ‘He was sticking half-way out of the cave, and seemed to be enjoying of the cool of the evening in a poetical sort of way. He was as big as four cart-horses, and all covered with shiny scales—deep-blue scales at the top of him, shading off to a tender sort o’ green below. As he breathed, there was that sort of flicker over his nostrils that you see over our chalk roads on a baking windless day in summer. He had his chin on his paws, and I should say he was meditating about things. Oh, yes, a peaceable sort o’ beast enough, and not ramping or carrying on or doing anything but what was quite right and proper. I admit all that. And yet, what am I to do? Scales, you know, and claws, and a tail for certain, though I didn’t see that end of him—I ain’t used to ’em, and I don’t hold with ’em, and that’s a fact!’

The Boy, who had apparently been absorbed in his book during his father’s recital, now closed the volume, yawned, clasped his hands behind his head, and said sleepily:

‘It’s all right, father. Don’t you worry. It’s only a dragon.’

‘Only a dragon?’ cried his father. ‘What do you mean, sitting there, you and your dragons? Only a dragon indeed! And what do you know about it?’

"Cos it is, and 'cos I do know,' replied the Boy, quietly. 'Look here, father, you know we've each of us got our line. You know about sheep, and weather, and things; I know about dragons. I always said, you know, that that cave up there was a dragon-cave. I always said it must have belonged to a dragon some time, and ought to belong to a dragon now, if rules count for anything. Well, now you tell me it has got a dragon, and so that's all right. I'm not half as much surprised as when you told me it hadn't got a dragon. Rules always come right if you wait quietly. Now, please, just leave this all to me. And I'll stroll up to-morrow morning—no, in the morning I can't, I've got a whole heap of things to do—well, perhaps in the evening, if I'm quite free, I'll go up and have a talk to him, and you'll find it'll be all right. Only, please, don't you go worrying round there without me. You don't understand 'em a bit, and they're very sensitive, you know!'

'He's quite right, father,' said the sensible mother. 'As he says, dragons is his line and not ours. He's wonderful knowing about book-beasts, as every one allows. And to tell the truth, I'm not half happy in my own mind, thinking of that poor animal lying alone up there, without a bit o' hot supper or anyone to change the news with; and maybe we'll be able to do something for him; and if he ain't quite respectable our Boy'll find it out quick enough. He's got a pleasant sort o' way with him that makes everybody tell him everything.'

Next day, after he'd had his tea, the Boy strolled up the chalky track that led to the summit of the Downs; and there, sure enough, he found the dragon, stretched lazily on the sward in front of his cave. The view from that point was a magnificent one. To the right and left, the bare and willowy leagues of Downs; in front, the vale, with its clustered homesteads, its threads of white roads running through orchards and welltilled acreage, and, far away, a hint of grey old cities on the horizon. A cool breeze played over the surface of the grass and the silver shoulder of a large moon was showing above distant junipers. No wonder the dragon seemed in a peaceful and contented mood; indeed, as the Boy approached he could hear the beast purring with a happy regularity. 'Well, we live and learn!' he said to himself. 'None of my books ever told me that dragons purred!'

'Hullo, dragon!' said the Boy, quietly, when he had got up to him.

The dragon, on hearing the approaching footsteps, made the beginning of a courteous effort to rise. But when he saw it was a Boy, he set his eyebrows

severely. ‘Now don’t you hit me,’ he said; ‘or bung stones, or squirt water, or anything. I won’t have it, I tell you!’

‘Not goin’ to hit you,’ said the Boy, wearily, dropping on the grass beside the beast: ‘and don’t, for goodness’ sake, keep on saying "Don’t"; I hear so much of it, and it’s monotonous, and makes me tired. I’ve simply looked in to ask you how you were and all that sort of thing; but if I’m in the way I can easily clear out. I’ve lots of friends, and no one can say I’m in the habit of shoving myself in where I’m not wanted!’

‘No, no, don’t go off in a huff,’ said the dragon, hastily; ‘fact is,—I’m as happy up here as the day’s long; never without an occupation, dear fellow, never without an occupation! And yet, between ourselves, it is a trifle dull at times.’

The Boy bit off a stalk of grass and chewed it. ‘Going to make a long stay here?’ he asked, politely.

‘Can’t hardly say at present,’ replied the dragon. ‘It seems a nice place enough—but I’ve only been here a short time, and one must look about and reflect and consider before settling down. It’s rather a serious thing, settling down. Besides—now I’m going to tell you something! You’d never guess it if you tried ever so!—fact is I’m such a confoundedly lazy beggar!’

‘You surprise me,’ said the Boy, civilly.

‘It’s the sad truth,’ the dragon went on, settling down between his paws and evidently delighted to have found a listener at last: ‘and I fancy that’s really how I came to be here. You see all the other fellows were so active and earnest and all that sort of thing—always rampaging, and skirmishing, and scouring the desert sands, and pacing the margin of the sea, and chasing knights all over the place, and devouring damsels, and going on generally—whereas I liked to get my meals regular and then to prop my back against a bit of rock and snooze a bit, and wake up and think of things going on and how they kept going on just the same, you know! So when it happened I got fairly caught.’

‘When what happened, please?’ asked the Boy.

‘That’s just what I don’t precisely know,’ said the dragon. ‘I suppose the earth sneezed, or shook itself, or the bottom dropped out of something. Anyhow there was a shake and a roar and a general stramash, and I found myself miles away underground and wedged in as tight as tight. Well, thank goodness, my wants are few, and at any rate I had peace and quietness and wasn’t always being asked to come along and do something. And I’ve got such an active mind—always occupied, I assure you! But time went on, and there was a certain sameness about the life, and at last I began to think it would be fun to work my way upstairs and see what you other fellows were doing. So I scratched and burrowed, and worked this way and that way and at last I came out through this cave here. And I like the country, and the view, and the people—what I’ve seen of ’em—and on the whole I feel inclined to settle down here.’

‘What’s your mind always occupied about?’ asked the Boy. ‘That’s what I want to know.’

The dragon coloured slightly and looked away. Presently he said bashfully:

‘Did you ever—just for fun—try to make up poetry—verses, you know?’

‘Course I have,’ said the Boy. ‘Heaps of it. And some of it’s quite good, I feel sure, only there’s no one here cares about it. Mother’s very kind and all that, when I read it to her, and so’s father for that matter. But somehow they don’t seem to—’

‘Exactly,’ cried the dragon; ‘my own case exactly. They don’t seem to, and you can’t argue with ’em about it. Now you’ve got culture, you have, I could tell it on you at once, and I should just like your candid opinion about some little things I threw off lightly, when I was down there. I’m awfully pleased to have met you, and I’m hoping the other neighbours will be equally agreeable. There was a very nice old gentleman up here only last night, but he didn’t seem to want to intrude.’

‘That was my father,’ said the Boy, ‘and he is a nice old gentleman, and I’ll introduce you some day if you like.’

‘Can’t you two come up here and dine or something to-morrow?’ asked the dragon, eagerly. ‘Only, of course, if you’ve got nothing better to do,’ he added politely.



‘Thanks awfully,’ said the Boy, ‘but we don’t go out anywhere without my mother, and, to tell you the truth, I’m afraid she mightn’t quite approve of you. You see there’s no getting over the hard fact that you’re a dragon, is there? And when you talk of settling down, and the neighbours, and so on, I can’t help feeling that you don’t quite realise your position. You’re an enemy of the human race, you see!’

‘Haven’t got an enemy in the world: said the dragon, cheerfully. ‘Too lazy to make ’em, to begin with. And if I do read other fellows my poetry, I’m always ready to listen to theirs!’

‘Oh, dear!’ cried the Boy, ‘I wish you’d try and grasp the situation properly. When the other people find you out, they’ll come after you with spears and swords and all sorts of things. You’ll have to be exterminated, according to their way of looking at it! You’re a scourge, and a pest, and a baneful monster!’

‘Not a word of truth in it,’ said the dragon, wagging his head solemnly. ‘Character’ll bear the strictest investigation. And now, there’s a little sonnet-thing I was working on when you appeared on the scene—’

‘Oh, if you won’t be sensible: cried the Boy, getting up, ‘I’m going off home. No, I can’t stop for sonnets; my mother’s sitting up. I’ll look you up to-morrow, sometime or other, and do for goodness’ sake try and realise that you’re a pestilential scourge, or you’ll find yourself in a most awful fix. Good-night!’

The Boy found it an easy matter to set the mind of his parents at ease about his new friend. They had always left that branch to him, and they took his word without a murmur. The shepherd was formally introduced and many compliments and kind inquiries were exchanged. His wife, however, though expressing her willingness to do anything she could,—to mend things, or set the cave to rights, or cook a little something when the dragon had been poring over sonnets and forgotten his meals, as male things will do,—could not be brought to recognise him formally. The fact that he was a dragon and ‘they didn’t know who he was’ seemed to count for everything with her. She made no objection, however, to her little son spending his evenings with the dragon quietly, so long as he was home by nine o’clock: and many a pleasant night they had, sitting on the sward,

while the dragon told stories of old, old times, when dragons were quite plentiful and the world was a livelier place than it is now, and life was full of thrills and jumps and surprises.

What the Boy had feared, however, soon came to pass. The most modest and retiring dragon in the world, if he's as big as four cart-horses and covered with blue scales, cannot keep altogether out of the public view. And so in the village tavern of nights the fact that a real live dragon sat brooding in the cave on the Downs was 'naturally a subject for talk. Though the villagers were extremely frightened, they were rather proud as well. It was a distinction to have a dragon of your own, and it was felt to be a feather in the cap of the village. Still, all were agreed that this sort of thing couldn't be allowed to go on. The dreadful beast must be exterminated, the countryside must be freed from this pest, this terror, this destroying scourge. The fact that not even a hen-roost was the worse for the dragon's arrival wasn't allowed to have anything to do with it. He was a dragon, and he couldn't deny it, and if he didn't choose to behave as such that was his own lookout. But in spite of much valiant talk no hero was found willing to take sword and spear and free the suffering village and win deathless fame; and each night's heated discussion always ended in nothing. Meanwhile the dragon, a happy Bohemian, lolled on the turf, enjoyed the sunsets, told antediluvian anecdotes to the Boy, and polished his old verses while meditating on fresh ones.

One day the Boy, on walking in to the village, found everything wearing a festal appearance which was not to be accounted for in the calendar. Carpets and gaycoloured stuffs were hung out of the windows, the church-bells clamoured noisily, the little street was flower-strewn, and the whole population jostled each other along either side of it, chattering, shoving, and ordering each other to stand back. The Boy saw a friend of his own age in the crowd and hailed him.

'What's up?' he cried. 'Is it the players, or bears, or a circus, or what?'

'It's all right,' his friend hailed back. 'He's a-coming.'

'Who's a-coming?' demanded the Boy, thrusting into the throng.

‘Why, St George, of course,’ replied his friend. ‘He’s heard tell of our dragon, and he’s comin’ on purpose to slay the deadly beast, and free us from his horrid yoke. O my! won’t there be a jolly fight!’

Here was news indeed! The Boy felt that he ought to make quite sure for himself, and he wriggled himself in between the legs of his good-natured elders, abusing them all the time for their unmannerly habit of shoving. Once in the front rank, he breathlessly awaited the arrival.

Presently from the far-away end of the line came the sound of cheering. Next, the measured tramp of a great war-horse made his heart beat quicker, and then he found himself cheering with the rest, as, amidst welcoming shouts, shrill cries of women, uplifting of babies and waving of handkerchiefs, St George paced slowly up the street. The Boy’s heart stood still and he breathed with sobs, the beauty and the grace of the hero were so far beyond anything he had yet seen. His fluted armour was inlaid with gold, his plumed helmet hung at his saddle-bow, and his thick fair hair framed a face gracious and gentle beyond expression till you caught the sternness in his eyes. He drew rein in front of the little inn, and the villagers crowded round with greetings and ( thanks and voluble statements of their wrongs and grievances and oppressions. The Boy heard the grave gentle voice of the Saint, assuring them that all would be well now, and that he would stand by them and see them righted and free them from their foe; then he dismounted and passed through the doorway and the crowd poured in after him. But the Boy made off up the hill as fast as he could lay his legs to the ground.

‘It’s all up, dragon!’ he shouted as soon as he was within sight of the beast. ‘He’s coming! He’s here now! You’ll have to pull yourself together and do something at last!’

The dragon was licking his scales and rubbing them with a bit of house-flannel the Boy’s mother had lent him, till he shone like a great turquoise.

‘Don’t be violent, Boy,’ he said without looking round. ‘Sit down and get your breath, and try and remember that the noun governs the verb, and then perhaps you’ll be good enough to tell me who’s coming?’

‘That’s right, take it coolly,’ said the Boy. ‘Hope you’ll be half as cool when I’ve got through with my news. It’s only St George who’s coming, that’s all; he rode into the village half-an-hour ago. Of course you can lick him—a great big fellow like you! But I thought I’d warn you, ’cos he’s sure to be round early, and he’s got the longest, wickedest-looking spear you ever did see!’ And the boy got up and began to jump round in sheer delight at the prospect of the battle.

‘O deary, deary me,’ moaned the dragon; ‘this is too awful. I won’t see him, and that’s flat. I don’t want to know the fellow at all. I’m sure he’s not nice. You must tell him to go away at once, please. Say he can write if he likes, but I can’t give him an interview. I’m not seeing anybody at present.’

‘Now dragon, dragon;’ said the Boy, imploringly, ‘don’t be perverse and wrongheaded. You’ve got to fight him some time or other, you know, ’cos he’s St George and you’re the dragon. Better get it over, and then we can go on with the sonnets. And you ought to consider other people a little, too. If it’s been dull up here for you, think how dull it’s been for me!’

‘My dear little man,’ said the dragon, solemnly, ‘just understand, once for all, that I can’t fight and I won’t fight. I’ve never fought in my life, and I’m not going to begin now, just to give you a Roman holiday. In old days I always let the other fellows—the earnest fellows—do all the fighting, and no doubt that’s why I have the pleasure of being here now.’

‘But if you don’t fight he’ll cut your head off!’ gasped the Boy, miserable at the prospect of losing both his fight and his friend.

‘Oh, I think not,’ said the dragon in his lazy way. ‘You’ll be able to arrange something. I’ve every confidence in you, you’re such a manager. Just run down, there’s a dear chap, and make it all right. I leave it entirely to you.’)

The Boy made his way back to the village in a state of great despondency. First of all, there wasn’t going to be any fight; next, his dear and honoured friend the dragon hadn’t shown up in quite such a heroic light as he would have liked; and lastly, whether the dragon was a hero at heart or not, it made no difference, for St George would most undoubtedly cut his head off. ‘Arrange things indeed!’ he said bitterly to himself. ‘The dragon treats the whole affair as if it was an invitation to tea and croquet.’

The villagers were straggling homewards as he passed up the street, all of them in the highest spirits, and gleefully discussing the splendid fight that was in store. The Boy pursued his way to the inn, and passed into the principal chamber, where St George now sat alone, musing over the chances of the fight, and the sad stories of rapine and of wrong that had so lately been poured into his sympathetic ears.

‘May I come in, St George?’ said the Boy, politely, as he paused at the door. ‘I want to talk to you about this little matter of the dragon, if you’re not tired of it by this time.’

‘Yes, come in, Boy,’ said the Saint, kindly. ‘Another tale of misery and wrong, I fear me. Is it a kind parent, then, of whom the tyrant has bereft you? Or some tender sister or brother? Well, it shall soon be avenged.’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ said the Boy. ‘There’s a misunderstanding somewhere, and I want to put it right. The fact is, this is a good dragon.’

‘Exactly,’ said St George, smiling pleasantly, ‘I quite understand. A good dragon. Believe me, I do not in the least regret that he is an adversary worthy of my steel, and no feeble specimen of his noxious tribe.’

‘But he’s not a noxious tribe,’ cried the Boy, distressedly. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, how stupid men are when they get an idea into their heads! I tell you he’s a good dragon, and a friend of mine, and tells me the most beautiful stories you ever heard, all about old times and when he was little. And he’s been so kind to mother, and mother’d do anything for him. And father likes him too, though father doesn’t hold with art and poetry much, and always falls asleep when the dragon starts talking about style. But the fact is, nobody can help liking him when once they know him. He’s so engaging and so trustful, and as simple as a child!’

‘Sit down, and draw your chair up,’ said St George. ‘I like a fellow who sticks up for his friends, and I’m sure the dragon has his good points, if he’s got a friend like you. But that’s not the question. All this evening I’ve been listening, with grief and anguish unspeakable, to tales of murder, theft, and wrong; rather too highly coloured, perhaps, not always quite convincing, but forming in the main a most serious roll of crime. History teaches us that the greatest rascals often possess all the domestic virtues; and I fear

that your cultivated friend, in spite of the qualities which have won (and rightly) your regard, has got to be speedily exterminated.'

'Oh, you've been taking in all the yarns those fellows have been telling you,' said the Boy, impatiently. 'Why, our villagers are the biggest story-tellers in all the country round. It's a known fact. You're a stranger in these parts, or else you'd have heard it already. All they want is a fight. They're the most awful beggars for getting up fights— it's meat and drink to them. Dogs, bulls, dragons—anything so long as it's a fight. Why, they've got a poor innocent badger in the stable behind here, at this moment. They were going to have some fun with him to-day, but they're saving him up now till your little affair's over. And I've no doubt they've been telling you what a hero you were, and how you were bound to win, in the cause of right and justice, and so on; but let me tell you, I came down the street just now, and they were betting six to four on the dragon freely!'

'Six to four on the dragon!' murmured St George, sadly, resting his cheek on his hand. 'This is an evil world, and sometimes I begin to think that all the wickedness in it is not entirely bottled up inside the dragons. And yet—may not this wily beast have misled you as to his real character, in order that your good report of him may serve as a cloak for his evil deeds? Nay, may there not be, at this very moment, some hapless Princess immured within yonder gloomy cavern?'

The moment he had spoken, St George was sorry for what he had said, the Boy looked so genuinely distressed.

'I assure you, St George,' he said earnestly, 'there's nothing of the sort in the cave at all. The dragon's a real gentleman, every inch of him, and I may say that no one would be more shocked and grieved than he would, at hearing you talk in that—that loose way about matters on which he has very strong views!'

'Well, perhaps I've been over-credulous,' said St George. 'Perhaps I've misjudged the animal. But what are we to do? Here are the dragon and I, almost face to face, each supposed to be thirsting for each other's blood. I don't see any way out of it, exactly. What do you suggest? Can't you arrange things, somehow?'

‘That’s just what the dragon said,’ replied the Boy, rather nettled. ‘Really, the way you two seem to leave everything to me—I suppose you couldn’t be persuaded to go away quietly, could you?’

‘Impossible, I fear,’ said the Saint. ‘Quite against the rules. You know that as well as I do.’

‘Well, then, look here,’ said the Boy, ‘it’s early yet—would you mind strolling up with me and seeing the dragon and talking it over? It’s not far, and any friend of mine will be most welcome.’

‘Well, it’s irregular,’ said St George, rising, ‘but really it seems about the most sensible thing to do. You’re taking a lot of trouble on your friend’s account,’ he added, goodnatureedly, as they passed out through the door together. ‘But cheer up! Perhaps there won’t have to be any fight after all.’

‘Oh, but I hope there will, though!’ replied the little fellow, wistfully.

‘I’ve brought a friend to see you, dragon,’ said the Boy, rather loud.

The dragon woke up with a start. ‘I was just-er-thinking about things,’ he said in his simple way. ‘Very pleased to make your acquaintance, sir. Charming weather we’re having!’

‘This is St George,’ said the Boy, shortly. ‘St George, let me introduce you to the dragon. We’ve come up to talk things over quietly, dragon, and now for goodness’ sake do let us have a little straight common-sense, and come to some practical business-like arrangement, for I’m sick of views and theories of life and personal tendencies, and all that sort of thing. I may perhaps add that my mother’s sitting up.’

‘So glad to meet you, St George,’ began the dragon, rather nervously, ‘because you’ve been a great traveller, I hear, and I’ve always been rather a stay-at-home. But I can show you many antiquities, many interesting features of our country-side, if you’re stopping here any time—’

‘I think,’ said St George, in his frank, pleasant way, ‘that we’d really better take the advice of our young friend here, and try to come to some understanding, on a business footing, about this little affair of ours. Now don’t you think that after all the simplest plan would be just to fight it out,

according to the rules, and let the best man win? They're betting on you, I may tell you, down in the village, but I don't mind that!

'Oh, yes, do, dragon,' said the Boy, delightedly; 'it'll save such a lot of bother!'

'My young friend, you shut up,' said the dragon, severely. 'Believe me, St George,' he went on, 'there's nobody in the world I'd sooner oblige than you and this young gentleman here. But the whole thing's nonsense, and conventionality, and popular thick-headedness. There's absolutely nothing to fight about, from beginning to end. And anyhow I'm not going to, so that settles it!'

'But supposing I make you?' said St George, rather nettled.

'You can't,' said the dragon, triumphantly. 'I should only go into my cave and retire for a time down the hole I came up. You'd soon get heartily sick of sitting outside and waiting for me to come out and fight you. And as soon as you'd really gone away, why, I'd come up again gaily, for I tell you frankly, I like this place, and I'm going to stay here!'

St George gazed for a while on the fair landscape around them. 'But this would be a beautiful place for a fight,' he began again persuasively. 'These great bare rolling !! Downs for the arena, —and me in my golden armour showing up against your big blue scaly coils! Think what a picture it would make!'

'Now you're trying to get at me through my artistic sensibilities: said the dragon. 'But it won't work. Not but what it would make a very pretty picture, as you say,' he added, wavering a little.

'We seem to be getting rather nearer to business,' put in the Boy. 'You must see, dragon, that there's got to be a fight of some sort, 'cos you can't want to have to go down that dirty old hole again and stop there till goodness knows when.'

'It might be arranged,' said St George, thoughtfully. 'I must spear you somewhere, of course, but I'm not bound to hurt you very much. There's such a lot of you that there must be a few spare places somewhere. Here, for instance, just behind your foreleg. It couldn't hurt you much, just here!'



‘Now you’re tickling, George,’ said the dragon, coyly. ‘No, that place won’t do at all. Even if it didn’t hurt,—and I’m sure it would, awfully,—it would make me laugh, and that would spoil everything.’

‘Let’s try somewhere else, then,’ said St George, patiently. ‘Under your neck, for instance, —all these folds of thick skin, —if I speared you here you’d never even know I’d done it!’

‘Yes, but are you sure you can hit off the right place?’ asked the dragon, anxiously.

‘Of course I am,’ said St George, with confidence. ‘You leave that to me!’

‘It’s just because I’ve got to leave it to you that I’m asking: replied the dragon, rather testily. ‘No doubt you would deeply regret any error you might make in the hurry of the moment; but you wouldn’t regret it half as much as I should! However, I suppose we’ve got to trust somebody, as we go through life, and your plan seems, on the whole, as good a one as any.’

‘Look here, dragon,’ interrupted the Boy, a little jealous on behalf of his friend, who seemed to be getting all the worst of the bargain: ‘I don’t quite see where you come in! There’s to be a fight, apparently, and you’re to be licked; and what I want to know is, what are you going to get out of it?’

‘St George,’ said the dragon, ‘just tell him, please,—what will happen after I’m vanquished in the deadly combat?’

‘Well, according to the rules I suppose I shall lead you in triumph down to the market-place or whatever answers to it,’ said St George.

‘Precisely,’ said the dragon. ‘And then—’

‘And then there’ll be shoutings and speeches and things,’ continued St George. ‘And I shall explain that you’re converted, and see the error of your ways, and so on.’

‘Quite so,’ said the dragon. ‘And then—?’

‘Oh, and then—’ said St George, ‘why, and then there will be the usual banquet, I suppose.’

‘Exactly,’ said the dragon; ‘and that’s where I come in. Look here,’ he continued, addressing the Boy, ‘I’m bored to death up here, and no one really appreciates me. I’m going into Society, I am, through the kindly aid of our friend here, who’s taking such a lot of trouble on my account; and you’ll find I’ve got all the qualities to endear me to people who entertain! So now that’s all settled, and if you don’t mind—I’m an oldfashioned fellow—don’t want to turn you out, but—’

‘Remember, you’ll have to do your proper share of the fighting, dragon!’ said St George, as he took the hint and rose to go; ‘I mean ramping, and breathing fire, and so on!’

‘I can ramp all right,’ replied the dragon, confidently; ‘as to breathing fire, it’s surprising how easily one gets out of practice; but I’ll do the best I can. Good-night!’

They had descended the hill and were almost back in the village again, when St George stopped short, ‘Knew I had forgotten something,’ he said. ‘There ought to be a Princess. Terror-stricken and chained to a rock, and all that sort of thing. Boy, can’t you arrange a Princess?’

The Boy was in the middle of a tremendous yawn. ‘I’m tired to death,’ he wailed, ‘and I can’t arrange a Princess, or anything more, at this time of night. And my mother’s sitting up, and do stop asking me to arrange more things till to-morrow!’

Next morning the people began streaming up to the Downs at quite an early hour, in their Sunday clothes and carrying baskets with bottle-necks sticking out of them, everyone intent on securing good places for the combat. This was not exactly a simple matter, for of course it was quite possible that the dragon might win, and in that case even those who had put their money on him felt they could hardly expect him to deal with his backers on a different footing to the rest. Places were chosen, therefore, with circumspection and with a view to a speedy retreat in case of emergency; and the front rank was mostly composed of boys who had escaped from parental control and now sprawled and rolled about on the

grass, regardless of the shrill threats and warnings discharged at them by their anxious mothers behind.

The Boy had secured a good front place, well up towards the cave, and was feeling as anxious as a stage-manager on a first night. Could the dragon be depended upon? He might change his mind and vote the whole performance rot; or else, seeing that the affair had been so hastily planned, without even a rehearsal, he might be too nervous to show up. The Boy looked narrowly at the cave, but it showed no sign of life or occupation. Could the dragon have made a moon-light flitting?

The higher portions of the ground were now black with sightseers, and presently a sound of cheering and a waving of handkerchiefs told that something was visible to them which the Boy, far up towards the dragon—end of the line as he was, could not yet see. A minute more and St George's red plumes topped the hill, as the Saint rode slowly forth on the great level space which stretched up to the grim mouth of the cave. Very gallant and beautiful he looked, on his tall war-horse, his golden armour glancing in the sun, his great spear held erect, the little white pennon, crimson-crossed, fluttering at its point. He drew rein and remained motionless. The lines of spectators began to give back a little, nervously; and even the boys in front stopped pulling hair and cuffing each other, and leaned forward expectant.

'Now then, dragon!' muttered the Boy, impatiently, fidgeting where he sat. He need not have distressed himself, had he only known. The dramatic possibilities of the thing had tickled the dragon immensely, and he had been up from an early hour, preparing for his first public appearance with as much heartiness as if the years had run backwards, and he had been again a little dragonlet, playing with his sisters on the floor of their mother's cave, at the game of saints-and-dragons, in which the dragon was bound to win.

A low muttering, mingled with snorts, now made itself heard; rising to a bellowing roar that seemed to fill the plain. Then a cloud of smoke obscured the mouth of the cave, and out of the midst of it the dragon himself, shining, sea-blue, magnificent, pranced splendidly forth; and everybody said, 'Oo-oo-oo!' as if he had been a mighty rocket! His scales were glittering, his long spiky tail lashed his sides, his claws tore up the turf and sent it flying high over his back, and smoke and fire incessantly

jetted from his angry nostrils. ‘Oh, well done, dragon!’ cried the Boy, excitedly. ‘Didn’t think he had it in him!’ he added to himself.

St George lowered his spear, bent his head, dug his heels into his horse’s sides, and came thundering over the turf. The dragon charged with a roar and a squeal,—a great blue whirling combination of coils and snorts and clashing jaws and—spikes and fire.

‘Missed!’ yelled the crowd. There was a moment’s entanglement of golden armour and blue-green coils, and spiky tail, and then the great horse, tearing at his bit, carried the Saint, his spear swung high in the air, almost up to the mouth of the cave. The dragon sat down and barked viciously, while St George with difficulty pulled his horse round into position.

‘End of Round One!’ thought the Boy. ‘How well they managed it! But I hope the Saint won’t get excited. I can trust the dragon all right. What a regular play-actor the fellow is!’

St George had at last prevailed on his horse to stand steady, and was looking round him as he wiped his brow. Catching sight of the Boy, he smiled and nodded, and held up three fingers for an instant.

‘It seems to be all planned out,’ said the Boy to himself. ‘Round Three is to be the finishing one, evidently. Wish it could have lasted a bit longer. Whatever’s that old fool of a dragon up to now?’

The dragon was employing the interval in giving a ramping-performance for the benefit of the crowd. Ramping, it should be explained, consists in running round and round in a wide circle, and sending waves and ripples of movement along the whole length of your spine, from your pointed ears right down to the spike at the end of your long tail. When you are covered with blue scales, the effect is particularly pleasing; and the Boy recollected the dragon’s recently expressed wish to become a social success.

St George now gathered up his reins and began to move forward, dropping the point of his spear and settling himself firmly in the saddle.

‘Time!’ yelled everybody excitedly; and the dragon, leaving off his ramping, sat up on end, and began to leap from one side to the other with huge ungainly bounds, whooping like a Red Indian. This naturally disconcerted

the horse, who swerved violently, the Saint only just saving himself by the mane; and as they shot past the dragon delivered a vicious snap at the horse's tail which sent the poor beast careering madly far over the Downs, so that the language of the Saint, who had lost a stirrup, was fortunately inaudible to the general assemblage.

Round Two evoked audible evidence of friendly feeling towards the dragon. The spectators were not slow to appreciate a combatant who could hold his own so well and clearly wanted to show good sport; and many encouraging remarks reached the ears of our friend as he strutted to and fro, his chest thrust out and his tail in the air, hugely enjoying his new popularity.

St George had dismounted and was tightening his girths, and telling his horse, with quite an Oriental flow of imagery, exactly what he thought of him, and his relations, and his conduct on the present occasion; so the Boy made his way down to the Saint's end of the line, and held his spear for him.

'It's been a jolly fight, St George!' he said with a sigh. 'Can't you let it last a bit longer?'

'Well, I think I'd better not,' replied the Saint. 'The fact is, your simple-minded old friend's getting conceited, now they've begun cheering him, and he'll forget all about the arrangement and take to playing the fool, and there's no telling where he would stop. I'll just finish him off this round.'

He swung himself into the saddle and took his spear from the Boy. 'Now don't you be afraid,' he added kindly. 'I've marked my spot exactly, and he's sure to give me all the assistance in his power, because he knows it's his only chance of being asked to the banquet!'

St George now shortened his spear, bringing the butt well up under his arm; and, instead of galloping as before, trotted smartly towards the dragon, who crouched at his approach, flicking his tail till it cracked in the air like a great cart-whip. The Saint wheeled as he neared his opponent and circled warily round him, keeping his eye on the spare place; while the dragon, adopting similar tactics, paced with caution round the same circle,

occasionally feinting with his head. So the two sparred for an opening, while the spectators maintained a breathless silence.

Though the round lasted for some minutes, the end was so swift that all the Boy saw was a lightning movement of the Saint's arm, and then a whirl and a confusion of spines, claws, tail, and flying bits of turf. The dust cleared away, the spectators whooped and ran in cheering, and the Boy made out that the dragon was down, pinned to the earth by the spear, while St George had "dismounted, and stood astride of him.

It all seemed so genuine that the Boy ran in breathlessly, hoping the dear old dragon wasn't really hurt. As he approached, the dragon lifted one large eyelid, winked solemnly, and collapsed again. He was held fast to earth by the neck, but the Saint had hit him in the spare place agreed upon, and it didn't even seem to tickle.

'Bain't you goin' to cut 'is 'ed orf, master?' asked one of the applauding crowd. He had backed the dragon, and naturally felt a trifle sore.

'Well, not to-day, I think,' replied St George, pleasantly. 'You see, that can be done at any time. There's no hurry at all. I think we'll all go down to the village first, and have some refreshment, and then I'll give him a good talking-to, and you'll find he'll be a very different dragon!'

At that magic word refreshment the whole crowd formed up in procession and silently awaited the signal to start. The time for talking and cheering and betting was past, the hour for action had arrived. St George, hauling on his spear with both hands, released the dragon, who rose and shook himself and ran his eye over his spikes and scales and things, to see that they were all in order. Then the Saint mounted and led off the procession, the dragon following meekly in the company of the Boy, while the thirsty spectators kept at a respectful interval behind.

There were great doings when they got down to the village again, and had formed up in front of the inn. After refreshment St George made a speech, in which he informed his audience that he had removed their direful scourge, at a great deal of trouble and inconvenience to himself, and now they weren't to go about grumbling and fancying they'd got grievances, because they hadn't. And they shouldn't be so fond of fights, because next time they might have to do the fighting themselves, which would not be

the same thing at all. And there was a certain badger in the inn stables which had got to be released at once, and he'd come and see it done himself. Then he told them that the dragon had been thinking over things, and saw that there were two sides to every question, and he wasn't going to do it any more, and if they were good perhaps he'd stay and settle down there. So they must make friends, and not be prejudiced, and go about fancying they knew everything there was to be known, because they didn't, not by a long way. And he warned them against the sin of romancing, and making up stories and fancying other people would believe them just because they were plausible and highly-coloured. Then he sat down, amidst much repentant cheering, and the dragon nudged the Boy in the ribs and whispered that he couldn't have done it better himself. Then everyone went off to get ready for the banquet.

Banquets are always pleasant things, consisting mostly, as they do, of eating and drinking; but the specially nice thing about a banquet is, that it comes when something's over, and there's nothing more to worry about, and to-morrow seems a long way off. St George was happy because there had been a fight and he hadn't had to kill anybody; for he didn't really like killing, though he generally had to do it. The dragon was happy because there had been a fight, and so far from being hurt in it he had won popularity and a sure footing in society. The Boy was happy because there had been a fight, and in spite of it all his two friends were on the best of terms. And all the others were happy because there had been a fight, and—well, they didn't require any other reasons for their happiness. The dragon exerted himself to say the right thing to everybody, and proved the life and soul of the evening; while the Saint and the Boy, as they looked on, felt that they were only assisting at a feast of which the honour and the glory were entirely the dragon's. But they didn't mind that, being good fellows, and the dragon was not in the least proud or forgetful. On the contrary, every ten minutes or so he leant over towards the Boy and said impressively: 'Look here! you will see me home afterwards, won't you?' And the Boy always nodded, though he had promised his mother not to be out late.

At last the banquet was over, the guests had dropped away with many good-nights and congratulations and invitations, and the dragon, who had seen the last of them off the premises, emerged into the street followed by the Boy, wiped his brow, sighed, sat down in the road and gazed at the stars. 'Jolly night it's been!' he murmured. 'Jolly stars! Jolly little place this!

Think I shall just stop here. Don't feel like climbing up any beastly hill. Boy's promised to see me home. Boy had better do it then! No responsibility on my part. Responsibility all Boy's!' And his chin sank on his broad chest and he slumbered peacefully.

'Oh, get up, dragon,' cried the Boy, piteously. 'You know my mother's sitting up, and I'm so tired, and you made me promise to see you home, and I never knew what it meant or I wouldn't have done it!' And the Boy sat down in the road by the side of the sleeping dragon, and cried.

The door behind them opened, a stream of light illumined the road, and St George, who had come out for a stroll in the cool night-air, caught sight of the two figures sitting there—the great motionless dragon and the tearful little Boy.

'What's the matter, Boy?' he inquired kindly, stepping to his side.

"Oh, it's this great lumbering pig of a dragon!' sobbed the Boy. 'First he makes me promise to see him home, and then he says I'd better do it, and goes to sleep! Might as well try to see a haystack home! And I'm so tired, and mother's—' here he broke down again.

'Now don't take on,' said St George. 'I'll stand by you, and we'll both see him home. Wake up, dragon!' he said sharply, shaking the beast by the elbow.

The dragon looked up sleepily. 'What a night, George!' he murmured; 'what a—'

'Now look here, dragon,' said the Saint, firmly. 'Here's this little fellow waiting to see you home, and you know he ought to have been in bed these two hours, and what his mother'll say I don't know, and anybody but a selfish pig would have made him go to bed long ago—'

'And he shall go to bed!' cried the dragon, starting up. 'Poor little chap, only fancy his being up at this hour! It's a shame, that's what it is, and I don't think, St George, you've been very considerate—but come along at once, and don't let us have any more arguing or shilly-shallying. You give me hold of your hand, Boy—thank you, George, an arm up the hill is just what I wanted!'



So they set off up the hill arm-in-arm, the Saint, the Dragon, and the Boy. The lights in the little village began to go out; but there were stars, and a late moon, as they climbed to the Downs together. And, as they turned the last corner and disappeared from view, snatches of an old song were borne back on the night-breeze. I can't be certain which of them was singing, but I think it was the Dragon!

# The Deliverers of Their Country

E. Nesbit

It all began with Effie's getting something in her eye. It hurt very much indeed, and it felt something like a red-hot spark—only it seemed to have legs as well, and wings like a fly. Effie rubbed and cried—not real crying, but the kind your eye does all by itself without your being miserable inside your mind—and then she went to her father to have the thing in her eye taken out. Effie's father was a doctor, so of course he knew how to take things out of eyes—he did it very cleverly with a soft paintbrush dipped in castor oil.

When he had gotten the thing out, he said: "This is very curious." Effie had often got things in her eye before, and her father had always seemed to think it was natural—rather tiresome and naughty perhaps, but still natural. He had never before thought it curious.

Effie stood holding her handkerchief to her eye, and said: "I don't believe it's out." People always say this when they have had something in their eyes.

"Oh, yes—it's out," said the doctor. "Here it is, on the brush. This is very interesting."

Effie had never heard her father say that about anything that she had any share in. She said: "What?"

The doctor carried the brush very carefully across the room, and held the point of it under his microscope—then he twisted the brass screws of the microscope, and looked through the top with one eye.

"Dear me," he said. "Dear, dear me! Four well-developed limbs; a long caudal appendage; five toes, unequal in lengths, almost like one of the *Lacertidae*, yet there are traces of wings." The creature under his eye wriggled a little in the castor oil, and he went on: "Yes; a batlike wing. A new specimen, undoubtedly. Effie, run round to the professor and ask him to be kind enough to step in for a few minutes."

"You might give me sixpence, Daddy," said Effie, "because I did bring you the new specimen. I took great care of it inside my eye, and my eye *does* hurt."

The doctor was so pleased with the new specimen that he gave Effie a shilling, and presently the professor stepped round. He stayed to lunch, and he and the doctor quarreled very happily all the afternoon about the name and the family of the thing that had come out of Effie's eye.

But at teatime another thing happened. Effie's brother Harry fished something out of his tea, which he thought at first was an earwig. He was just getting ready to drop it on the floor, and end its life in the usual way, when it shook itself in the spoon—spread two wet wings, and flopped onto the tablecloth. There it sat, stroking itself with its feet and stretching its wings, and Harry said: "Why, it's a tiny newt!"

The professor leaned forward before the doctor could say a word. "I'll give you half a crown for it, Harry, my lad," he said, speaking very fast; and then he picked it up carefully on his handkerchief.

"It is a new specimen," he said, "and finer than yours, Doctor."

It was a tiny lizard, about half an inch long—with scales and wings.

So now the doctor and the professor each had a specimen, and they were both very pleased. But before long these specimens began to seem less valuable. For the next morning, when the knife-boy was cleaning the doctor's boots, he suddenly dropped the brushes and the boot and the blacking, and screamed out that he was burnt. And from inside the boot came crawling a lizard as big as a kitten, with large, shiny wings.

"Why," said Effie, "I know what it is. It is a dragon like the one St. George killed."

And Effie was right. That afternoon Towser was bitten in the garden by a dragon about the size of a rabbit, which he had tried to chase, and the next morning all the papers were full of the wonderful "winged lizards" that were appearing all over the country. The papers would not call them dragons, because, of course, no one believes in dragons nowadays—and at any rate the papers were not going to be so silly as to believe in fairy stories. At first there were only a few, but in a week or two the country was simply running alive with dragons of all sizes, and in the air you could sometimes see them as thick as a swarm of bees. They all looked alike except as to size. They were green with scales, and they had four legs and a long tail and great wings like bats' wings, only the wings were a pale, half-transparent yellow, like the gear-boxes on bicycles.

They breathed fire and smoke, as all proper dragons must, but still the newspapers went on pretending they were lizards, until the editor of the *Standard* was picked up and carried away by a very large one, and then the other newspaper people had not anyone left to tell them what they ought not to believe. So when the largest elephant in the Zoo was carried off by a dragon, the papers gave up pretending—and put ALARMING PLAGUE OF DRAGONS at the top of the paper.

You have no idea how alarming it was, and at the same time how aggravating. The large-size dragons were terrible certainly, but when once you had found out that the dragons always went to bed early because they were afraid of the chill night air, you had only to stay indoors all day, and you were pretty safe from the big ones. But the smaller sizes were a perfect nuisance. The ones as big as earwigs got in the soap, and they got in the butter. The ones as big as dogs got in the bath, and the fire and smoke inside them made them steam like anything when the cold water tap was turned on, so that careless people were often scalded quite severely. The ones that were as large as pigeons would get into workbaskets or corner drawers and bite you when you were in a hurry to get a needle or a handkerchief. The ones as big as sheep were easier to avoid, because you could see them coming; but when they flew in at the windows and curled up under your eiderdown, and you did not find them till you went to bed, it was always a shock. The ones this size did not eat people, only lettuce, but they always scorched the sheets and pillowcases dreadfully.

Of course, the County Council and the police did everything that could be done: It was no use offering the hand of the Princess to anyone who killed a dragon. This way was all very well in olden times—when there was only one dragon and one Princess; but now there were far more dragons than Princesses—although the Royal Family was a large one. And besides, it would have been a mere waste of Princesses to offer rewards for killing dragons, because everybody killed as many dragons as they could quite out of their own heads and without rewards at all, just to get the nasty things out of the way. The County Council undertook to cremate all dragons delivered at their offices between the hours of ten and two, and whole wagonloads and cartloads and truckloads of dead dragons could be seen any day of the week standing in a long line in the street where the County Council had their offices. Boys brought barrowloads of dead dragons, and children on their way home from morning school would call in to leave the handful or two of little dragons they had brought in their satchels, or carried in their knotted pocket handkerchiefs. And yet there

seemed to be as many dragons as ever. Then the police stuck up great wood and canvas towers covered with patent glue. When the dragons flew against these towers, they stuck fast, as flies and wasps do on the sticky papers in the kitchen; and when the towers were covered all over with dragons, the police inspector used to set fire to the towers, and burnt them and dragons and all.

And yet there seemed to be more dragons than ever. The shops were full of patent dragon poison and anti-dragon soap, and dragonproof curtains for the windows; and indeed, everything that could be done was done.

And yet there seemed to be more dragons than ever.

It was not very easy to know what would poison a dragon, because, you see, they ate such different things. The largest kind ate elephants as long as there were any, and then went on with horses and cows. Another size ate nothing but lilies of the valley, and a third size ate only Prime Ministers if they were to be had, and, if not, would feed freely on servants in livery. Another size lived on bricks, and three of them ate two thirds of the South Lambeth Infirmary in one afternoon.

But the size Effie was most afraid of was about as big as your dining room, and that size ate little girls and boys.

At first Effie and her brother were quite pleased with the change in their lives. It was so amusing to sit up all night instead of going to sleep, and to play in the garden lighted by electric lamps. And it sounded so funny to hear Mother say, when they were going to bed: "Good night, my darlings, sleep sound all day, and don't get up too soon. You must not get up before it's quite dark. You wouldn't like the nasty dragons to catch you."

But after a time they got very tired of it all: They wanted to see the flowers and trees growing in the fields, and to see the pretty sunshine out of doors, and not just through glass windows and patent dragonproof curtains. And they wanted to play on the grass, which they were not allowed to do in the electric lamp-lighted garden because of the night-dew.

And they wanted so much to get out, just for once, in the beautiful, bright, dangerous daylight, that they began to try and think of some reason why they ought to go out. Only they did not like to disobey their mother.

But one morning their mother was busy preparing some new dragon poison to lay down in the cellars, and their father was bandaging the hand of the boot boy, which had been scratched by one of the dragons who liked to eat Prime Ministers when they were to be had, so nobody remembered to say to the children: "Don't get up till it is quite dark!"

"Go now," said Harry. "It would not be disobedient to go. And I know exactly what we ought to do, but I don't know how we ought to do it."

"What ought we to do?" said Effie.

"We ought to wake St. George, of course," said Harry. "He was the only person in his town who knew how to manage dragons; the people in the fairy tales don't count. But St. George is a real person, and he is only asleep, and he is waiting to be waked up. Only nobody believes in St. George now. I heard father say so."

"We do," said Effie.

"Of course we do. And don't you see, Ef, that's the very reason why we could wake him? You can't wake people if you don't believe in them, can you?"

Effie said no, but where could they find St. George?

"We must go and look," said Harry boldly. "You shall wear a dragonproof frock, made of stuff like the curtains. And I will smear myself all over with the best dragon poison, and—"

Effie clasped her hands and skipped with joy and cried: "Oh, Harry! I know where we can find St. George! In St. George's Church, of course."

"Um," said Harry, wishing he had thought of it for himself, "you have a little sense sometimes, for a girl."

So the next afternoon, quite early, long before the beams of sunset announced the coming night, when everybody would be up and working, the two children got out of bed. Effie wrapped herself in a shawl of dragonproof muslin—there was no time to make the frock—and Harry made a horrid mess of himself with the patent dragon poison. It was warranted harmless to infants and invalids, so he felt quite safe.

Then they joined hands and set out to walk to St. George's Church. As you know, there are many St. George's churches, but fortunately they took

the turning that leads to the right one, and went along in the bright sunlight, feeling very brave and adventurous.

There was no one about in the streets except dragons, and the place was simply swarming with them. Fortunately none of the dragons were just the right size for eating little boys and girls, or perhaps this story might have had to end here. There were dragons on the pavement, and dragons on the roadway, dragons basking on the front doorsteps of public buildings, and dragons preening their wings on the roofs in the hot afternoon sun. The town was quite green with them. Even when the children had gotten out of the town and were walking in the lanes, they noticed that the fields on each side were greener than usual with the scaly legs and tails; and some of the smaller sizes had made themselves asbestos nests in the flowering hawthorn hedges.

Effie held her brother's hand very tight, and once when a fat dragon flopped against her ear she screamed out, and a whole flight of green dragons rose from the field at the sound, and sprawled away across the sky. The children could hear the rattle of their wings as they flew.

"Oh, I want to go home," said Effie.

"Don't be silly," said Harry. "Surely you haven't forgotten about the Seven Champions and all the princes. People who are going to be their country's deliverers never scream and say they want to go home."

"And are we," asked Effie—"deliverers, I mean?"

"You'll see," said her brother, and on they went.

When they came to St. George's Church they found the door open, and they walked right in—but St. George was not there, so they walked around the churchyard outside, and presently they found the great stone tomb of St. George, with the figure of him carved in marble outside, in his armor and helmet, and with his hands folded on his breast.

"How ever can we wake him?" they said. Then Harry spoke to St. George—but he would not answer; and he called, but St. George did not seem to hear; and then he actually tried to waken the great dragon-slayer by shaking his marble shoulders. But St. George took no notice.

Then Effie began to cry, and she put her arms around St. George's neck as well as she could for the marble, which was very much in the way at the

back, and she kissed the marble face, and she said: "Oh, dear, good, kind St. George, please wake up and help us."

And at that St. George opened his eyes sleepily, and stretched himself and said: "What's the matter, little girl?"

So the children told him all about it; he turned over in his marble and leaned on one elbow to listen. But when he heard that there were so many dragons he shook his head.

"It's no good," he said, "they would be one too many for poor old George. You should have waked me before. I was always for a fair fight—one man one dragon, was my motto."

Just then a flight of dragons passed overhead, and St. George half drew his sword.

But he shook his head again and pushed the sword back as the flight of dragons grew small in the distance.

"I can't do anything," he said. "Things have changed since my time. St. Andrew told me about it. They woke him up over the engineers' strike, and he came to talk to me. He says everything is done by machinery now; there must be some way of settling these dragons. By the way, what sort of weather have you been having lately?"

This seemed so careless and unkind that Harry would not answer, but Effie said patiently, "It has been very fine. Father says it is the hottest weather there has ever been in this country."

"Ah, I guessed as much," said the Champion, thoughtfully. "Well, the only thing would be ... dragons can't stand wet and cold, that's the only thing. If you could find the taps." St. George was beginning to settle down again on his stone slab.

"Good night, very sorry I can't help you," he said, yawning behind his marble hand.

"Oh, but you can," cried Effie. "Tell us—what taps?"

"Oh, like in the bathroom," said St. George, still more sleepily. "And there's a looking glass, too; shows you all the world and what's going on. St. Denis told me about it; said it was a very pretty thing. I'm sorry I can't—good night."



And he fell back into his marble and was fast asleep again in a moment.

"We shall never find the taps," said Harry. "I say, wouldn't it be awful if St. George woke up when there was a dragon near, the size that eats champions?"

Effie pulled off her dragonproof veil. "We didn't meet any the size of the dining room as we came along," she said. "I daresay we shall be quite safe."

So she covered St. George with the veil, and Harry rubbed off as much as he could of the dragon poison onto St. George's armor, so as to make everything quite safe for him.

"We might hide in the church till it is dark," he said, "and then—"

But at that moment a dark shadow fell on them, and they saw that it was a dragon exactly the size of the dining room at home.

So then they knew that all was lost. The dragon swooped down and caught the two children in his claws; he caught Effie by her green silk sash, and Harry by the little point at the back of his Eton jacket—and then, spreading his great yellow wings, he rose into the air, rattling like a third-class carriage when the brake is hard on.

"Oh, Harry," said Effie, "I wonder when he will eat us!" The dragon was flying across woods and fields with great flaps of his wings that carried him a quarter of a mile at each flap.

Harry and Effie could see the country below, hedges and rivers and churches and farmhouses flowing away from under them, much faster than you see them running away from the sides of the fastest express train.

And still the dragon flew on. The children saw other dragons in the air as they went, but the dragon who was as big as the dining room never stopped to speak to any of them, but just flew on quite steadily.

"He knows where he wants to go," said Harry. "Oh, if he would only drop us before he gets there!"

But the dragon held on tight, and he flew and flew and flew until at last, when the children were quite giddy, he settled down, with a rattling of all his scales, on the top of a mountain. And he lay there on his great green scaly side, panting, and very much out of breath, because he had come

such a long way. But his claws were fast in Effie's sash and the little point at the back of Harry's Eton jacket.

Then Effie took out the knife Harry had given her on her birthday. It had cost only sixpence to begin with, and she had had it a month, and it never could sharpen anything but slate-pencils; but somehow she managed to make that knife cut her sash in front, and crept out of it, leaving the dragon with only a green silk bow in one of his claws. That knife would never have cut Harry's jacket-tail off, though, and when Effie had tried for some time she saw that this was so and gave it up. But with her help Harry managed to wriggle quietly out of his sleeves, so that the dragon had only an Eton jacket in his other claw. Then the children crept on tiptoe to a crack in the rocks and got in. It was much too narrow for the dragon to get in also, so they stayed in there and waited to make faces at the dragon when he felt rested enough to sit up and begin to think about eating them. He was very angry, indeed, when they made faces at him, and blew out fire and smoke at them, but they ran farther into the cave so that he could not reach them, and when he was tired of blowing he went away.

But they were afraid to come out of the cave, so they went farther in, and presently the cave opened out and grew bigger, and the floor was soft sand, and when they had come to the very end of the cave there was a door, and on it was written: UNIVERSAL TAPROOM. PRIVATE. NO ONE ALLOWED INSIDE.

So they opened the door at once just to peep in, and then they remembered what St. George had said.

"We can't be worse off than we are," said Harry, "with a dragon waiting for us outside. Let's go in."

They went boldly into the taproom, and shut the door behind them.

And now they were in a sort of room cut out of the solid rock, and all along one side of the room were taps, and all the taps were labeled with china labels like you see in baths. And as they could both read words of two syllables or even three sometimes, they understood at once that they had gotten to the place where the weather is turned on from. There were six big taps labeled "Sunshine," "Wind," "Rain," "Snow," "Hail," "Ice," and a lot of little ones, labeled "Fair to moderate," "Showery," "South breeze," "Nice growing weather for the crops," "Skating," "Good open weather," "South wind," "East wind," and so on. And the big tap labeled "Sunshine" was turned full on. They could not see any sunshine—the cave was lighted by a skylight of blue glass—so they supposed the sunlight was pouring out by

some other way, as it does with the tap that washes out the underneath parts of patent sinks in kitchens.

Then they saw that one side of the room was just a big looking glass, and when you looked in it you could see everything that was going on in the world—and all at once, too, which is not like most looking glasses. They saw the carts delivering the dead dragons at the County Council offices, and they saw St. George asleep under the dragonproof veil. And they saw their mother at home crying because her children had gone out in the dreadful, dangerous daylight, and she was afraid a dragon had eaten them. And they saw the whole of England, like a great puzzle map—green in the field parts and brown in the towns, and black in the places where they make coal and crockery and cutlery and chemicals. All over it, on the black parts, and on the brown, and on the green, there was a network of green dragons. And they could see that it was still broad daylight, and no dragons had gone to bed yet.

Effie said, "Dragons do not like cold." And she tried to turn off the sunshine, but the tap was out of order, and that was why there had been so much hot weather, and why the dragons had been able to be hatched. So they left the sunshine tap alone, and they turned on the snow and left the tap full on while they went to look in the glass. There they saw the dragons running all sorts of ways like ants if you are cruel enough to pour water into an ant-heap, which, of course, you never are. And the snow fell more and more.

Then Effie turned the rain tap quite full on, and presently the dragons began to wriggle less, and by-and-by some of them lay quite still, so the children knew the water had put out the fires inside them, and they were dead. So then they turned on the hail—only half on, for fear of breaking people's windows—and after a while there were no more dragons to be seen moving.

Then the children knew that they were indeed the deliverers of their country.

"They will put up a monument to us," said Harry, "as high as Nelson's! All the dragons are dead."

"I hope the one that was waiting outside for us is dead!" said Effie. "And about the monument, Harry, I'm not so sure. What can they do with such a lot of dead dragons? It would take years and years to bury them, and they

could never be burnt now they are so soaking wet. I wish the rain would wash them off into the sea."

But this did not happen, and the children began to feel that they had not been so frightfully clever after all.

"I wonder what this old thing's for," said Harry. He had found a rusty old tap, which seemed as though it had not been used for ages. Its china label was quite coated over with dirt and cobwebs. When Effie had cleaned it with a bit of her skirt—for curiously enough both the children had come out without pocket handkerchiefs—she found that the label said "Waste."

"Let's turn it on," she said. "It might carry off the dragons."

The tap was very stiff from not having been used for such a long time, but together they managed to turn it on, and then ran to the mirror to see what happened.

Already a great, round black hole had opened in the very middle of the map of England, and the sides of the map were tilting themselves up, so that the rain ran down toward the hole.

"Oh, hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!" cried Effie, and she hurried back to the taps and turned on everything that seemed wet. "Showery," "Good open weather," "Nice growing weather for the crops," and even "South" and "South-West," because she had heard her father say that those winds brought rain.

And now the floods of rain were pouring down on the country, and great sheets of water flowed toward the center of the map, and cataracts of water poured into the great round hole in the middle of the map, and the dragons were being washed away and disappearing down the waste pipe in great green masses and scattered green shoals—single dragons and dragons by the dozen; of all sizes, from the ones that carry off elephants down to the ones that get in your tea.

Presently there was not a dragon left. So then they turned off the tap named "Waste," and they half-turned off the one labeled "Sunshine"—it was broken, so that they could not turn it off altogether—and they turned on "Fair to moderate" and "Showery" and both taps stuck, so that they could not be turned off, which accounts for our climate.

How did they get home again? By the Snowdon railway of course.

And was the nation grateful? Well—the nation was very wet. And by the time the nation had gotten dry again it was interested in the new invention for toasting muffins by electricity, and all the dragons were almost forgotten. Dragons do not seem so important when they are dead and gone, and, you know, there never was a reward offered.

And what did Father and Mother say when Effie and Harry got home?

My dear, that is the sort of silly question you children always will ask. However, just for this once I don't mind telling you.

Mother said: "Oh, my darlings, my darlings, you're safe—you're safe! You naughty children—how could you be so disobedient? Go to bed at once!"

And their father the doctor said: "I wish I had known what you were going to do! I should have liked to preserve a specimen. I threw away the one I got out of Effie's eye. I intended to get a more perfect specimen. I did not anticipate this immediate extinction of the species."

The professor said nothing, but he rubbed his hands. He had kept his specimen—the one the size of an earwig that he gave Harry half a crown for—and he has it to this day.

You must get him to show it to you!

# Eleven

Sandra Cisneros

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are --underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is. You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

"Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

"Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and

sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

"That's not, I don't, you're not...Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it's yours," Mrs. Price says. "I remember you wearing it once." Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the school yard fence, or even leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, "Now Rachel, that's enough," because she sees I've shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

"Rachel," Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad. "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

"But it's not--"

"Now!" Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me— ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and one— are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises from coming out of me, until there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber than Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything's okay.

Today I'm eleven. There's cake Mama's making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we'll eat and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it's too late.

I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny o in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.



# By Any Other Name

Santha Rama Rau

At the Anglo-Indian day school in Zorinabad to which my sister and I were sent when she was eight and I was five and a half, they changed our names. On the first day of school, a hot, windless morning of a north Indian September, we stood in the headmistress's study and she said, "Now you're the new girls. What are your names?"

My sister answered for us. "I am Premila, and she"—nodding in my direction—"is Santha."

The headmistress had been in India, I suppose, fifteen years or so, but she still smiled her helpless inability to cope with Indian names. Her rimless half-glasses glittered, and the precarious bun on the top of her head trembled as she shook her head. "Oh, my dears, those are much too hard for me. Suppose we give you pretty English names. Wouldn't that be more jolly? Let's see, now—Pamela for you, I think." She shrugged in a baffled way at my sister. "That's as close as I can get. And for you," she said to me, "how about Cynthia? Isn't that nice?"

My sister was always less easily intimidated than I was, and while she kept a stubborn silence, I said, "Thank you," in a very tiny voice.

We had been sent to that school because my father, among his responsibilities as an officer of the civil service, had a tour of duty to perform in the villages around that steamy little provincial town, where he had his headquarters at that time. He used to make his shorter inspection tours on horseback, and a week before, in the stale heat of a typically post-monsoon day, we had waved good-by to him and a little procession—an assistant, a secretary, two bearers, and the man to look after the bedding rolls and luggage. They rode away through our large

garden, still bright green from the rains, and we turned back into the twilight of the house and the sound of fans whispering in every room.

Up to then, my mother had refused to send Premila to school in the British-run establishments of that time, because, she used to say, “you can bury a dog’s tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular.” The examinations and degrees from entirely Indian schools were not, in those days, considered valid. In my case, the question had never come up, and probably never would have come up if Mother’s extraordinary good health had not broken down. For the first time in my life, she was not able to continue the lessons she had been giving us every morning. So our Hindi books were put away, the stories of the Lord Krishna as a little boy were left in mid-air, and we were sent to the Anglo-Indian school.

That first day at school is still, when I think of it, a remarkable one. At that age, if one’s name is changed, one develops a curious form of dual personality. I remember having a certain detached and disbelieving concern in the actions of “Cynthia,” but certainly no responsibility. Accordingly, I followed the thin, erect back of the headmistress down the veranda to my classroom feeling, at most, a passing interest in what was going to happen to me in this strange, new atmosphere of School.

The building was Indian in design, with wide verandas opening onto a central courtyard, but Indian verandas are usually whitewashed, with stone floors. These, in the tradition of British schools, were painted dark brown and had matting on the floors. It gave a feeling of extra intensity to the heat.

I suppose there were about a dozen Indian children in the school—which contained perhaps forty children in all—and four of them were in my class. They were all sitting at the back of the room, and I went to join them. I sat next to a small, solemn girl who didn’t smile at me. She had long, glossy black braids and wore a cotton dress, but she still kept on her Indian

jewelry—a gold chain around her neck, thin gold bracelets, and tiny ruby studs in her ears. Like most Indian children, she had a rim of black kohl around her eyes. The cotton dress should have looked strange, but all I could think of was that I should ask my mother if I couldn't wear a dress to school, too, instead of my Indian clothes.

I can't remember too much about the proceedings in class that day, except for the beginning. The teacher pointed to me and asked me to stand up. "Now, dear, tell the class your name."

I said nothing.

"Come along," she said, frowning slightly. "What's your name, dear?"

"I don't know," I said, finally.

The English children in the front of the class—there were about eight or ten of them—giggled and twisted around in their chairs to look at me. I sat down quickly and opened my eyes very wide, hoping in that way to dry them off. The little girl with the braids put out her hand and very lightly touched my arm. She still didn't smile.

Most of that morning I was rather bored. I looked briefly at the children's drawings pinned to the wall, and then concentrated on a lizard clinging to the ledge of the high, barred window behind the teacher's head.

Occasionally it would shoot out its long yellow tongue for a fly, and then it would rest, with its eyes closed and its belly palpitating as though it were swallowing several times quickly. The lessons were mostly concerned with reading and writing and simple numbers—things that my mother had already taught me—and I paid very little attention. The teacher wrote on the easel blackboard words like "bat" and "cat," which seemed babyish to me; only "apple" was new and incomprehensible.

When it was time for the lunch recess, I followed the girl with braids out onto the veranda. There the children from the other classes were

assembled. I saw Premila at once and ran over to her, as she had charge of our lunchbox. The children were all opening packages and sitting down to eat sandwiches. Premila and I were the only ones who had Indian food—thin wheat chapatties, some vegetable curry, and a bottle of buttermilk. Premila thrust half of it into my hand and whispered fiercely that I should go and sit with my class, because that was what the others seemed to be doing.

The enormous black eyes of the little Indian girl from my class looked at my food longingly, so I offered her some. But she only shook her head and plowed her way solemnly through her sandwiches.

I was very sleepy after lunch, because at home we always took a siesta. It was usually a pleasant time of day, with the bedroom darkened against the harsh afternoon sun, the drifting off into sleep with the sound of Mother's voice reading a story in one's mind, and, finally, the shrill, fussy voice of the ayah waking one for tea.

At school, we rested for a short time on low, folding cots on the veranda, and then we were expected to play games. During the hot part of the afternoon we played indoors, and after the shadows had begun to lengthen and the slight breeze of the evening had come up we moved outside to the wide courtyard.

I had never really grasped the system of competitive games. At home, whenever we played tag or guessing games, I was always allowed to "win"— "because," Mother used to tell Premila, "she is the youngest, and we have to allow for that." I had often heard her say it, and it seemed quite reasonable to me, but the result was that I had no clear idea of what "winning" meant.

When we played twos-and-threes that afternoon at school, in accordance with my training, I let one of the small English boys catch me, but was naturally rather puzzled when the other children did not return the courtesy. I ran about for what seemed like hours without ever catching

anyone, until it was time for school to close. Much later I learned that my attitude was called “not being a good sport,” and I stopped allowing myself to be caught, but it was not for years that I really learned the spirit of the thing.

When I saw our car come up to the school gate, I broke away from my classmates and rushed toward it yelling, “Ayah! Ayah!” It seemed like an eternity since I had seen her that morning—a wizened, affectionate figure in her white cotton sari, giving me dozens of urgent and useless instructions on how to be a good girl at school. Premila followed more sedately, and she told me on the way home never to do that again in front of the other children.

When we got home we went straight to Mother’s high, white room to have tea with her, and I immediately climbed onto the bed and bounced gently up and down on the springs. Mother asked how we had liked our first day in school. I was so pleased to be home and to have left that peculiar Cynthia behind that I had nothing whatever to say about school, except to ask what “apple” meant. But Premila told Mother about the classes, and added that in her class they had weekly tests to see if they had learned their lessons well.

I asked, “What’s a test?” Premila said, “You’re too small to have them. You won’t have them in your class for donkey’s years.” She had learned the expression that day and was using it for the first time. We all laughed enormously at her wit. She also told Mother, in an aside, that we should take sandwiches to school the next day. Not, she said, that she minded. But they would be simpler for me to handle.

That whole lovely evening I didn’t think about school at all. I sprinted barefoot across the lawns with my favorite playmate, the cook’s son, to the stream at the end of the garden. We quarreled in our usual way, waded in the tepid water under the lime trees, and waited for the night to bring out the smell of the jasmine. I listened with fascination to his stories of ghosts and demons, until I was too frightened to cross the garden alone in the

semidarkness. The ayah found me, shouted at the cook's son, scolded me, hurried me in to supper—it was an entirely usual, wonderful evening.

It was a week later, the day of Premila's first test, that our lives changed rather abruptly. I was sitting at the back of my class, in my usual inattentive way, only half listening to the teacher. I had started a rather guarded friendship with the girl with the braids, whose name turned out to be Nalini (Nancy, in school). The three other Indian children were already fast friends. Even at that age it was apparent to all of us that friendship with the English or Anglo-Indian children was out of the question. Occasionally, during the class, my new friend and I would draw pictures and show them to each other secretly.

The door opened sharply and Premila marched in. At first, the teacher smiled at her in a kindly and encouraging way and said, "Now, you're little Cynthia's sister?"

Premila didn't even look at her. She stood with her feet planted firmly apart and her shoulders rigid, and addressed herself directly to me. "Get up," she said. "We're going home."

I didn't know what had happened, but I was aware that it was a crisis of some sort. I rose obediently and started to walk toward my sister.

"Bring your pencils and your notebook," she said. I went back for them, and together we left the room. The teacher started to say something just as Premila closed the door, but we didn't wait to hear what it was.

In complete silence we left the school grounds and started to walk home. Then I asked Premila what the matter was. All she would say was "We're going home for good."

It was a very tiring walk for a child of five and a half, and I dragged along behind Premila with my pencils growing sticky in my hand. I can still remember looking at the dusty hedges, and the tangles of thorns in the

ditches by the side of the road, smelling the faint fragrance from the eucalyptus trees and wondering whether we would ever reach home. Occasionally a horse-drawn tonga passed us, and the women, in their pink or green silks, stared at Premila and me trudging along on the side of the road. A few coolies and a line of women carrying baskets of vegetables on their heads smiled at us. But it was nearing the hottest time of day, and the road was almost deserted. I walked more and more slowly, and shouted to Premila, from time to time, "Wait for me!" with increasing peevishness. She spoke to me only once, and that was to tell me to carry my notebook on my head, because of the sun.

When we got to our house the ayah was just taking a tray of lunch into Mother's room. She immediately started a long, worried questioning about what are you children doing back here at this hour of the day.

Mother looked very startled and very concerned, and asked Premila what had happened.

Premila said, "We had our test today, and She made me and the other Indians sit at the back of the room, with a desk between each one."

Mother said, "Why was that, darling?"

"She said it was because Indians cheat," Premila added. "So I don't think we should go back to that school."

Mother looked very distant, and was silent a long time. At last she said, "Of course not, darling." She sounded displeased.

We all shared the curry she was having for lunch, and afterward I was sent off to the beautifully familiar bedroom for my siesta. I could hear Mother and Premila talking through the open door.

Mother said, "Do you suppose she understood all that?"

Premila said, "I shouldn't think so. She's a baby."

Mother said, "Well, I hope it won't bother her."

Of course, they were both wrong. I understood it perfectly, and I remember it all very clearly. But I put it happily away, because it had all happened to a girl called Cynthia, and I never was really particularly interested in her.



# How Much Land Does a Man Need?

Leo Tolstoy

An elder sister came to visit her younger sister in the country. The elder was married to a tradesman in town, the younger to a peasant in the village. As the sisters sat over their tea talking, the elder began to boast of the advantages of town life: saying how comfortably they lived there, how well they dressed, what fine clothes her children wore, what good things they ate and drank, and how she went to the theater, promenades, and entertainments.

The younger sister was piqued, and in turn disparaged the life of a tradesman, and stood up for that of a peasant.

'I would not change my way of life for yours,' said she. 'We may live roughly, but at least we are free from anxiety. You live in better style than we do, but though you often earn more than you need, you are very likely to lose all you have. You know the proverb, "Loss and gain are brothers twain." It often happens that people who are wealthy one day are begging their bread the next. Our way is safer. Though a peasant's life is not a fat one, it is a long one. We shall never grow rich, but we shall always have enough to eat.'

The elder sister said sneeringly:

'Enough? Yes, if you like to share with the pigs and the calves! What do you know of elegance or manners! However much your good man may slave, you will die as you are living—on a dung heap—and your children the same.'

'Well, what of that?' replied the younger. 'Of course our work is rough and coarse. But, on the other hand, it is sure; and we need not bow to any one. But you, in your towns, are surrounded by temptations; to-day all may be

right, but to-morrow the Evil One may tempt your husband with cards, wine, or women, and all will go to ruin. Don't such things happen often enough?'

Pahóm, the master of the house, was lying on the top of the oven, and he listened to the women's chatter.

'It is perfectly true,' thought he. 'Busy as we are from childhood tilling mother earth, we peasants have no time to let any nonsense settle in our heads. Our only trouble is that we haven't land enough. If I had plenty of land, I shouldn't fear the Devil himself!'

The women finished their tea, chatted a while about dress, and then cleared away the tea-things and lay down to sleep.

But the Devil had been sitting behind the oven, and had heard all that was said. He was pleased that the peasant's wife had led her husband into boasting, and that he had said that if he had plenty of land he would not fear the Devil himself.

'All right,' thought the Devil. 'We will have a tussle. I'll give you land enough; and by means of that land I will get you into my power!'

Close to the village there lived a lady, a small landowner, who had an estate of about three hundred acres. She had always lived on good terms with the peasants, until she engaged as her steward an old soldier, who took to burdening the people with fines. However careful Pahóm tried to be, it happened again and again that now a horse of his got among the lady's oats, now a cow strayed into her garden, now his calves found their way into her meadows—and he always had to pay a fine.

Pahóm paid, but grumbled, and, going home in a temper, was rough with his family. All through that summer, Pahóm had much trouble because of this steward; and he was even glad when winter came and the cattle had to

be stabled. Though he grudged the fodder when they could no longer graze on the pasture-land, at least he was free from anxiety about them.

In the winter the news got about that the lady was going to sell her land, and that the keeper of the inn on the high road was bargaining for it. When the peasants heard this they were very much alarmed.

'Well,' thought they, 'if the innkeeper gets the land, he will worry us with fines worse than the lady's steward. We all depend on that estate.'

So the peasants went on behalf of their Commune, and asked the lady not to sell the land to the innkeeper; offering her a better price for it themselves. The lady agreed to let them have it. Then the peasants tried to arrange for the Commune to buy the whole estate, so that it might be held by all in common. They met twice to discuss it, but could not settle the matter; the Evil One sowed discord among them, and they could not agree. So they decided to buy the land individually, each according to his means; and the lady agreed to this plan as she had to the other.

Presently Pahóm heard that a neighbor of his was buying fifty acres, and that the lady had consented to accept one half in cash and to wait a year for the other half. Pahóm felt envious.

'Look at that,' thought he, 'the land is all being sold, and I shall get none of it.' So he spoke to his wife.

'Other people are buying,' said he, 'and we must also buy twenty acres or so. Life is becoming impossible. That steward is simply crushing us with his fines.'

So they put their heads together and considered how they could manage to buy it. They had one hundred rubles laid by. They sold a colt, and one half of their bees; hired out one of their sons as a laborer, and took his wages in advance; borrowed the rest from a brother-in-law, and so scraped together half the purchase money.

Having done this, Pahóm chose out a farm of forty acres, some of it wooded, and went to the lady to bargain for it. They came to an agreement, and he shook hands with her upon it, and paid her a deposit in advance. Then they went to town and signed the deeds; he paying half the price down, and undertaking to pay the remainder within two years.

So now Pahóm had land of his own. He borrowed seed, and sowed it on the land he had bought. The harvest was a good one, and within a year he had managed to pay off his debts both to the lady and to his brother-in-law. So he became a landowner, plowing and sowing his own land, making hay on his own land, cutting his own trees, and feeding his cattle on his own pasture. When he went out to plow his fields, or to look at his growing corn, or at his grass-meadows, his heart would fill with joy. The grass that grew and the flowers that bloomed there, seemed to him unlike any that grew elsewhere. Formerly, when he had passed by that land, it had appeared the same as any other land, but now it seemed quite different.

So Pahóm was well contented, and everything would have been right if the neighboring peasants would only not have trespassed on his corn-fields and meadows. He appealed to them most civilly, but they still went on: now the Communal herdsmen would let the village cows stray into his meadows; then horses from the night pasture would get among his corn. Pahóm turned them out again and again, and forgave their owners, and for a long time he forbore from prosecuting any one. But at last he lost patience and complained to the District Court. He knew it was the peasants' want of land, and no evil intent on their part, that caused the trouble; but he thought:

'I cannot go on overlooking it, or they will destroy all I have. They must be taught a lesson.'

So he had them up, gave them one lesson, and then another, and two or three of the peasants were fined. After a time Pahóm's neighbors began to bear him a grudge for this, and would now and then let their cattle on to his land on purpose. One peasant even got into Pahóm's wood at night and

cut down five young lime trees for their bark. Pahóm passing through the wood one day noticed something white. He came nearer, and saw the stripped trunks lying on the ground, and close by stood the stumps, where the tree had been. Pahóm was furious.

'If he had only cut one here and there it would have been bad enough,' thought Pahóm, 'but the rascal has actually cut down a whole clump. If I could only find out who did this, I would pay him out.'

He racked his brains as to who it could be. Finally he decided: 'It must be Simon-no one else could have done it.' So he went to Simon's homestead to have a look round, but he found nothing, and only had an angry scene. However, he now felt more certain than ever that Simon had done it, and he lodged a complaint. Simon was summoned. The case was tried, and re-tried, and at the end of it all Simon was acquitted, there being no evidence against him. Pahóm felt still more aggrieved, and let his anger loose upon the Elder and the Judges.

'You let thieves grease your palms,' said he. 'If you were honest folk yourselves, you would not let a thief go free.'

So Pahóm quarreled with the Judges and with his neighbors. Threats to burn his building began to be uttered. So though Pahóm had more land, his place in the Commune was much worse than before.

About this time a rumor got about that many people were moving to new parts.

'There's no need for me to leave my land,' thought Pahóm. 'But some of the others might leave our village, and then there would be more room for us. I would take over their land myself, and make my estate a bit bigger. I could then live more at ease. As it is, I am still too cramped to be comfortable.'

One day Pahóm was sitting at home, when a peasant passing through the village, happened to call in. He was allowed to stay the night, and supper

was given him. Pahóm had a talk with this peasant and asked him where he came from. The stranger answered that he came from beyond the Volga, where he had been working. One word led to another, and the man went on to say that many people were settling in those parts. He told how some people from his village had settled there. They had joined the Commune, and had had twenty-five acres per man granted them. The land was so good, he said, that the rye sown on it grew as high as a horse, and so thick that five cuts of a sickle made a sheaf. One peasant, he said, had brought nothing with him but his bare hands, and now he had six horses and two cows of his own.

Pahóm's heart kindled with desire. He thought:

'Why should I suffer in this narrow hole, if one can live so well elsewhere? I will sell my land and my homestead here, and with the money I will start afresh over there and get everything new. In this crowded place one is always having trouble. But I must first go and find out all about it myself.'

Towards summer he got ready and started. He went down the Volga on a steamer to Samára, then walked another three hundred miles on foot, and at last reached the place. It was just as the stranger had said. The peasants had plenty of land: every man had twenty-five acres of Communal land given him for his use, and any one who had money could buy, besides, at two shillings an acre as much good freehold land as he wanted.

Having found out all he wished to know, Pahóm returned home as autumn came on, and began selling off his belongings. He sold his land at a profit, sold his homestead and all his cattle, and withdrew from membership of the Commune. He only waited till the spring, and then started with his family for the new settlement.

As soon as Pahóm and his family arrived at their new abode, he applied for admission into the Commune of a large village. He stood treat to the Elders, and obtained the necessary documents. Five shares of Communal land were given him for his own and his sons' use: that is to say—125 acres

(not all together, but in different fields) besides the use of the Communal pasture. Pahóm put up the buildings he needed, and bought cattle. Of the Communal land alone he had three times as much as at his former home, and the land was good corn-land. He was ten times better off than he had been. He had plenty of arable land and pasturage, and could keep as many head of cattle as he liked.

At first, in the bustle of building and settling down, Pahóm was pleased with it all, but when he got used to it he began to think that even here he had not enough land. The first year, he sowed wheat on his share of the Communal land, and had a good crop. He wanted to go on sowing wheat, but had not enough Communal land for the purpose, and what he had already used was not available; for in those parts wheat is only sown on virgin soil or on fallow land. It is sown for one or two years, and then the land lies fallow till it is again overgrown with prairie grass. There were many who wanted such land, and there was not enough for all; so that people quarreled about it. Those who were better off, wanted it for growing wheat, and those who were poor, wanted it to let to dealers, so that they might raise money to pay their taxes. Pahóm wanted to sow more wheat; so he rented land from a dealer for a year. He sowed much wheat and had a fine crop, but the land was too far from the village—the wheat had to be carted more than ten miles. After a time Pahóm noticed that some peasant-dealers were living on separate farms, and were growing wealthy; and he thought:

'If I were to buy some freehold land, and have a homestead on it, it would be a different thing, altogether. Then it would all be nice and compact.'

The question of buying freehold land recurred to him again and again. He went on in the same way for three years; renting land and sowing wheat. The seasons turned out well and the crops were good, so that he began to lay money by. He might have gone on living contentedly, but he grew tired of having to rent other people's land every year, and having to scramble for it. Wherever there was good land to be had, the peasants would rush for it and it was taken up at once, so that unless you were sharp

about it you got none. It happened in the third year that he and a dealer together rented a piece of pasture land from some peasants; and they had already plowed it up, when there was some dispute, and the peasants went to law about it, and things fell out so that the labor was all lost.

'If it were my own land,' thought Pahóm, 'I should be independent, and there would not be all this unpleasantness.'

So Pahóm began looking out for land which he could buy; and he came across a peasant who had bought thirteen hundred acres, but having got into difficulties was willing to sell again cheap. Pahóm bargained and haggled with him, and at last they settled the price at 1,500 rubles, part in cash and part to be paid later. They had all but clinched the matter, when a passing dealer happened to stop at Pahóm's one day to get a feed for his horse. He drank tea with Pahóm, and they had a talk. The dealer said that he was just returning from the land of the Bashkírs, far away, where he had bought thirteen thousand acres of land all for 1,000 rubles. Pahóm questioned him further, and the tradesman said:

'All one need do is to make friends with the chiefs. I gave away about one hundred rubles' worth of dressing-gowns and carpets, besides a case of tea, and I gave wine to those who would drink it; and I got the land for less than twopence an acre. And he showed Pahóm the title-deeds, saying:

'The land lies near a river, and the whole prairie is virgin soil.'

Pahóm plied him with questions, and the tradesman said:

'There is more land there than you could cover if you walked a year, and it all belongs to the Bashkírs. They are as simple as sheep, and land can be got almost for nothing.'

'There now,' thought Pahóm, 'with my one thousand rubles, why should I get only thirteen hundred acres, and saddle myself with a debt besides? If I take it out there, I can get more than ten times as much for the money.'



Pahóm inquired how to get to the place, and as soon as the tradesman had left him, he prepared to go there himself. He left his wife to look after the homestead, and started on his journey taking his man with him. They stopped at a town on their way, and bought a case of tea, some wine, and other presents, as the tradesman had advised. On and on they went until they had gone more than three hundred miles, and on the seventh day they came to a place where the Bashkírs had pitched their tents. It was all just as the tradesman had said. The people lived on the steppes, by a river, in felt-covered tents. They neither tilled the ground, nor ate bread. Their cattle and horses grazed in herds on the steppe. The colts were tethered behind the tents, and the mares were driven to them twice a day. The mares were milked, and from the milk kumiss was made. It was the women who prepared kumiss, and they also made cheese. As far as the men were concerned, drinking kumiss and tea, eating mutton, and playing on their pipes, was all they cared about. They were all stout and merry, and all the summer long they never thought of doing any work. They were quite ignorant, and knew no Russian, but were good-natured enough.

As soon as they saw Pahóm, they came out of their tents and gathered round their visitor. An interpreter was found, and Pahóm told them he had come about some land. The Bashkírs seemed very glad; they took Pahóm and led him into one of the best tents, where they made him sit on some down cushions placed on a carpet, while they sat round him. They gave him tea and kumiss, and had a sheep killed, and gave him mutton to eat. Pahóm took presents out of his cart and distributed them among the Bashkírs, and divided among them the tea. The Bashkírs were delighted. They talked a great deal among themselves, and then told the interpreter to translate.

'They wish to tell you,' said the interpreter, 'that they like you, and that it is our custom to do all we can to please a guest and to repay him for his gifts. You have given us presents, now tell us which of the things we possess please you best, that we may present them to you.'

'What pleases me best here,' answered Pahóm, 'is your land. Our land is crowded, and the soil is exhausted; but you have plenty of land and it is good land. I never saw the like of it.'

The interpreter translated. The Bashkírs talked among themselves for a while. Pahóm could not understand what they were saying, but saw that they were much amused, and that they shouted and laughed. Then they were silent and looked at Pahóm while the interpreter said:

'They wish me to tell you that in return for your presents they will gladly give you as much land as you want. You have only to point it out with your hand and it is yours.'

The Bashkírs talked again for a while and began to dispute. Pahóm asked what they were disputing about, and the interpreter told him that some of them thought they ought to ask their Chief about the land and not act in his absence, while others thought there was no need to wait for his return. While the Bashkírs were disputing, a man in a large fox-fur cap appeared on the scene. They all became silent and rose to their feet. The interpreter said, 'This is our Chief himself.'

Pahóm immediately fetched the best dressing-gown and five pounds of tea, and offered these to the Chief. The Chief accepted them, and seated himself in the place of honor. The Bashkírs at once began telling him something. The Chief listened for a while, then made a sign with his head for them to be silent, and addressing himself to Pahóm, said in Russian:

'Well, let it be so. Choose whatever piece of land you like; we have plenty of it.'

'How can I take as much as I like?' thought Pahóm. 'I must get a deed to make it secure, or else they may say, "It is yours," and afterwards may take it away again.'

'Thank you for your kind words,' he said aloud. 'You have much land, and I only want a little. But I should like to be sure which bit is mine. Could it not be measured and made over to me? Life and death are in God's hands. You good people give it to me, but your children might wish to take it away again.'

'You are quite right,' said the Chief. 'We will make it over to you.'

'I heard that a dealer had been here,' continued Pahóm, 'and that you gave him a little land, too, and signed title-deeds to that effect. I should like to have it done in the same way.'

The Chief understood.

'Yes,' replied he, 'that can be done quite easily. We have a scribe, and we will go to town with you and have the deed properly sealed.'

'And what will be the price?' asked Pahóm.

'Our price is always the same: one thousand rubles a day.'

Pahóm did not understand.

'A day? What measure is that? How many acres would that be?'

'We do not know how to reckon it out,' said the Chief. 'We sell it by the day. As much as you can go round on your feet in a day is yours, and the price is one thousand rubles a day.'

Pahóm was surprised.

'But in a day you can get round a large tract of land,' he said.

The Chief laughed.

'It will all be yours!' said he. 'But there is one condition: If you don't return on the same day to the spot whence you started, your money is lost.'

'But how am I to mark the way that I have gone?'

'Why, we shall go to any spot you like, and stay there. You must start from that spot and make your round, taking a spade with you. Wherever you think necessary, make a mark. At every turning, dig a hole and pile up the turf; then afterwards we will go round with a plow from hole to hole. You may make as large a circuit as you please, but before the sun sets you must return to the place you started from. All the land you cover will be yours.'

Pahóm was delighted. It was decided to start early next morning. They talked a while, and after drinking some more kumiss and eating some more mutton, they had tea again, and then the night came on. They gave Pahóm a feather-bed to sleep on, and the Bashkírs dispersed for the night, promising to assemble the next morning at daybreak and ride out before sunrise to the appointed spot.

Pahóm lay on the feather-bed, but could not sleep. He kept thinking about the land.

'What a large tract I will mark off!' thought he. 'I can easily do thirty-five miles in a day. The days are long now, and within a circuit of thirty-five miles what a lot of land there will be! I will sell the poorer land, or let it to peasants, but I'll pick out the best and farm it. I will buy two ox-teams, and hire two more laborers. About a hundred and fifty acres shall be plow-land, and I will pasture cattle on the rest.'

Pahóm lay awake all night, and dozed off only just before dawn. Hardly were his eyes closed when he had a dream. He thought he was lying in that same tent, and heard somebody chuckling outside. He wondered who it could be, and rose and went out, and he saw the Bashkír Chief sitting in front of the tent holding his side and rolling about with laughter. Going nearer to the Chief, Pahóm asked: 'What are you laughing at?' But he saw

that it was no longer the Chief, but the dealer who had recently stopped at his house and had told him about the land. Just as Pahóm was going to ask, 'Have you been here long?' he saw that it was not the dealer, but the peasant who had come up from the Volga, long ago, to Pahóm's old home. Then he saw that it was not the peasant either, but the Devil himself with hoofs and horns, sitting there and chuckling, and before him lay a man barefoot, prostrate on the ground, with only trousers and a shirt on. And Pahóm dreamed that he looked more attentively to see what sort of a man it was lying there, and he saw that the man was dead, and that it was himself! He awoke horror-struck.

'What things one does dream,' thought he.

Looking round he saw through the open door that the dawn was breaking.

'It's time to wake them up,' thought he. 'We ought to be starting.'

He got up, roused his man (who was sleeping in his cart), bade him harness; and went to call the Bashkírs.

'It's time to go to the steppe to measure the land,' he said.

The Bashkírs rose and assembled, and the Chief came, too. Then they began drinking kumiss again, and offered Pahóm some tea, but he would not wait.

'If we are to go, let us go. It is high time,' said he.

The Bashkírs got ready and they all started: some mounted on horses, and some in carts. Pahóm drove in his own small cart with his servant, and took a spade with him. When they reached the steppe, the morning red was beginning to kindle. They ascended a hillock (called by the Bashkírs a shikhan) and dismounting from their carts and their horses, gathered in one spot. The Chief came up to Pahóm and stretched out his arm towards the plain:

'See,' said he, 'all this, as far as your eye can reach, is ours. You may have any part of it you like.'

Pahóm's eyes glistened: it was all virgin soil, as flat as the palm of your hand, as black as the seed of a poppy, and in the hollows different kinds of grasses grew breast high.

The Chief took off his fox-fur cap, placed it on the ground and said: 'This will be the mark. Start from here, and return here again. All the land you go round shall be yours.'

Pahóm took out his money and put it on the cap. Then he took off his outer coat, remaining in his sleeveless under coat. He unfastened his girdle and tied it tight below his stomach, put a little bag of bread into the breast of his coat, and tying a flask of water to his girdle, he drew up the tops of his boots, took the spade from his man, and stood ready to start. He considered for some moments which way he had better go—it was tempting everywhere.

'No matter,' he concluded, 'I will go towards the rising sun.'

He turned his face to the east, stretched himself, and waited for the sun to appear above the rim.

'I must lose no time,' he thought, 'and it is easier walking while it is still cool.'

The sun's rays had hardly flashed above the horizon, before Pahóm, carrying the spade over his shoulder, went down into the steppe.

Pahóm started walking neither slowly nor quickly. After having gone a thousand yards he stopped, dug a hole, and placed pieces of turf one on another to make it more visible. Then he went on; and now that he had

walked off his stiffness he quickened his pace. After a while he dug another hole.

Pahóm looked back. The hillock could be distinctly seen in the sunlight, with the people on it, and the glittering tires of the cartwheels. At a rough guess Pahóm concluded that he had walked three miles. It was growing warmer; he took off his under-coat, flung it across his shoulder, and went on again. It had grown quite warm now; he looked at the sun, it was time to think of breakfast.

'The first shift is done, but there are four in a day, and it is too soon yet to turn. But I will just take off my boots,' said he to himself.

He sat down, took off his boots, stuck them into his girdle, and went on. It was easy walking now.

'I will go on for another three miles,' thought he, 'and then turn to the left. The spot is so fine, that it would be a pity to lose it. The further one goes, the better the land seems.'

He went straight on for a while, and when he looked round, the hillock was scarcely visible and the people on it looked like black ants, and he could just see something glistening there in the sun.

'Ah,' thought Pahóm, 'I have gone far enough in this direction, it is time to turn. Besides I am in a regular sweat, and very thirsty.'

He stopped, dug a large hole, and heaped up pieces of turf. Next he untied his flask, had a drink, and then turned sharply to the left. He went on and on; the grass was high, and it was very hot.

Pahóm began to grow tired: he looked at the sun and saw that it was noon.

'Well,' he thought, 'I must have a rest.'

He sat down, and ate some bread and drank some water; but he did not lie down, thinking that if he did he might fall asleep. After sitting a little while, he went on again. At first he walked easily: the food had strengthened him; but it had become terribly hot, and he felt sleepy; still he went on, thinking: 'An hour to suffer, a life-time to live.'

He went a long way in this direction also, and was about to turn to the left again, when he perceived a damp hollow: 'It would be a pity to leave that out,' he thought. 'Flax would do well there.' So he went on past the hollow, and dug a hole on the other side of it before he turned the corner. Pahóm looked towards the hillock. The heat made the air hazy: it seemed to be quivering, and through the haze the people on the hillock could scarcely be seen.

'Ah!' thought Pahóm, 'I have made the sides too long; I must make this one shorter.' And he went along the third side, stepping faster. He looked at the sun: it was nearly half way to the horizon, and he had not yet done two miles of the third side of the square. He was still ten miles from the goal. 'No,' he thought, 'though it will make my land lop-sided, I must hurry back in a straight line now. I might go too far, and as it is I have a great deal of land.'

So Pahóm hurriedly dug a hole, and turned straight towards the hillock.

Pahóm went straight towards the hillock, but he now walked with difficulty. He was done up with the heat, his bare feet were cut and bruised, and his legs began to fail. He longed to rest, but it was impossible if he meant to get back before sunset. The sun waits for no man, and it was sinking lower and lower.

'Oh dear,' he thought, 'if only I have not blundered trying for too much! What if I am too late?'

He looked towards the hillock and at the sun. He was still far from his goal, and the sun was already near the rim.



Pahóm walked on and on; it was very hard walking, but he went quicker and quicker. He pressed on, but was still far from the place. He began running, threw away his coat, his boots, his flask, and his cap, and kept only the spade which he used as a support.

'What shall I do,' he thought again, 'I have grasped too much, and ruined the whole affair. I can't get there before the sun sets.'

And this fear made him still more breathless. Pahóm went on running, his soaking shirt and trousers stuck to him, and his mouth was parched. His breast was working like a blacksmith's bellows, his heart was beating like a hammer, and his legs were giving way as if they did not belong to him. Pahóm was seized with terror lest he should die of the strain.

Though afraid of death, he could not stop. 'After having run all that way they will call me a fool if I stop now,' thought he. And he ran on and on, and drew near and heard the Bashkírs yelling and shouting to him, and their cries inflamed his heart still more. He gathered his last strength and ran on.

The sun was close to the rim, and cloaked in mist looked large, and red as blood. Now, yes now, it was about to set! The sun was quite low, but he was also quite near his aim. Pahóm could already see the people on the hillock waving their arms to hurry him up. He could see the fox-fur cap on the ground, and the money on it, and the Chief sitting on the ground holding his sides. And Pahóm remembered his dream.

'There is plenty of land,' thought he, 'but will God let me live on it? I have lost my life, I have lost my life! I shall never reach that spot!'

Pahóm looked at the sun, which had reached the earth: one side of it had already disappeared. With all his remaining strength he rushed on, bending his body forward so that his legs could hardly follow fast enough to keep him from falling. Just as he reached the hillock it suddenly grew dark. He looked up—the sun had already set. He gave a cry: 'All my labor

has been in vain,' thought he, and was about to stop, but he heard the Bashkírs still shouting, and remembered that though to him, from below, the sun seemed to have set, they on the hillock could still see it. He took a long breath and ran up the hillock. It was still light there. He reached the top and saw the cap. Before it sat the Chief laughing and holding his sides. Again Pahóm remembered his dream, and he uttered a cry: his legs gave way beneath him, he fell forward and reached the cap with his hands.

'Ah, what a fine fellow!' exclaimed the Chief. 'He has gained much land!'

Pahóm's servant came running up and tried to raise him, but he saw that blood was flowing from his mouth. Pahóm was dead!

The Bashkírs clicked their tongues to show their pity.

His servant picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahóm to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.

# How It All Happened

Louisa May Alcott

It was a small room, with nothing in it but a bed, two chairs, and a big chest. A few little gowns hung on the wall, and the only picture was the wintry sky, sparkling with stars, framed by the uncurtained window. But the moon, pausing to peep, saw something pretty and heard something pleasant. Two heads in little round nightcaps lay on one pillow, two pairs of wide-awake blue eyes stared up at the light, and two tongues were going like mill clappers.

"I'm so glad we got our shirts done in time! It seemed as if we never should, and I don't think six cents is half enough for a great red flannel thing with four button-holes—do you?" said one little voice, rather wearily.

"No; but then we each made four, and fifty cents is a good deal of money. Are you sorry we didn't keep our quarters for ourselves?" asked the other voice, with an under-tone of regret in it.

"Yes, I am, till I think how pleased the children will be with our tree, for they don't expect anything, and will be so surprised. I wish we had more toys to put on it, for it looks so small and mean with only three or four things."

"It won't hold any more, so I wouldn't worry about it. The toys are very red and yellow, and I guess the babies won't know how cheap they are, but like them as much as if they cost heaps of money."

This was a cheery voice, and as it spoke the four blue eyes turned toward the chest under the window, and the kind moon did her best to light up the tiny tree standing there. A very pitiful little tree it was—only a branch of hemlock in an old flower-pot, propped up with bits of coal, and hung with a few penny toys earned by the patient fingers of the elder sisters, that the little ones should not be disappointed.

But in spite of the magical moonlight the broken branch, with its scanty supply of fruit, looked pathetically poor, and one pair of eyes filled slowly with tears, while the other pair lost their happy look, as if a cloud had come over the sunshine.

"Are you crying, Dolly?"

"Not much, Polly."

"What makes you, dear?"

"I didn't know how poor we were till I saw the tree, and then I couldn't help it," sobbed the elder sister, for at twelve she already knew something of the cares of poverty, and missed the happiness that seemed to vanish out of all their lives when father died.

"It's dreadful! I never thought we'd have to earn our tree, and only be able to get a broken branch, after all, with nothing on it but three sticks of candy, two squeaking dogs, a red cow, and an ugly bird with one feather in its tail;" and overcome by a sudden sense of destitution, Polly sobbed even more despairingly than Dolly.

"Hush, dear; we must cry softly, or mother will hear, and come up, and then we shall have to tell. You know we said we wouldn't seem to mind not having any Christmas, she felt so sorry about it."

"I *must* cry, but I'll be quiet."

So the two heads went under the pillow for a few minutes, and not a sound betrayed them as the little sisters cried softly in one another's arms, lest mother should discover that they were no longer careless children, but brave young creatures trying to bear their share of the burden cheerfully.

When the shower was over, the faces came out shining like roses after rain, and the voices went on again as before.

"Don't you wish there really was a Santa Claus, who knew what we wanted, and would come and put two silver half-dollars in our stockings, so we could go and see *Puss in Boots* at the Museum to-morrow afternoon?"

"Yes, indeed; but we didn't hang up any stockings, you know, because mother had nothing to put in them. It does seem as if rich people might think of poor people now and then. Such little bits of things would make us happy, and it couldn't be much trouble to take two small girls to the play, and give them candy now and then."

"I shall when I'm rich, like Mr. Chrome and Miss Kent. I shall go round every Christmas with a big basket of goodies, and give *all* the poor children some."

"P'r'aps if we sew ever so many flannel shirts we may be rich by-and-by. I should give mother a new bonnet first of all, for I heard Miss Kent say no

lady would wear such a shabby one. Mrs. Smith said fine bonnets didn't make real ladies. I like her best, but I do want a locket like Miss Kent's."

"I should give mother some new rubbers, and then I should buy a white apron, with frills like Miss Kent's, and bring home nice bunches of grapes and good things to eat, as Mr. Chrome does. I often smell them, but he never gives *me* any; he only says, 'Hullo, chick!' and I'd rather have oranges any time."

"It will take us a long while to get rich, I'm afraid. It makes me tired to think of it. I guess we'd better go to sleep now, dear."

"Good-night, Dolly."

"Good-night, Polly."

Two soft kisses were heard, a nestling sound followed, and presently the little sisters lay fast asleep cheek against cheek, on the pillow wet with their tears, never dreaming what was going to happen to them to-morrow.

Now Miss Kent's room was next to theirs, and as she sat sewing she could hear the children's talk, for they soon forgot to whisper. At first she smiled, then she looked sober, and when the prattle ceased she said to herself, as she glanced about her pleasant chamber:

"Poor little things! they think I'm rich, and envy me, when I'm only a milliner earning my living. I ought to have taken more notice of them, for their mother has a hard time, I fancy, but never complains. I'm sorry they heard what I said, and if I knew how to do it without offending her, I'd trim a nice bonnet for a Christmas gift, for she *is* a lady, in spite of her old clothes. I can give the children some of the things they want anyhow, and I will. The idea of those mites making a fortune out of shirts at six cents apiece!"

Miss Kent laughed at the innocent delusion, but sympathized with her little neighbors, for she knew all about hard times. She had good wages now, but spent them on herself, and liked to be fine rather than neat. Still, she was a good-hearted girl, and what she had overheard set her to thinking soberly, then to acting kindly, as we shall see.

"If I hadn't spent all my money on my dress for the party to-morrow night, I'd give each of them a half-dollar. As I can not, I'll hunt up the other things they wanted, for it's a shame they shouldn't have a bit of Christmas, when they tried so hard to please the little ones."

As she spoke she stirred about her room, and soon had a white apron, an old carnelian heart on a fresh blue ribbon, and two papers of bonbons ready. As no stockings were hung up, she laid a clean towel on the floor before the door, and spread forth the small gifts to look their best.

Miss Kent was so busy that she did not hear a step come quietly up stairs, and Mr. Chrome, the artist, peeped at her through the balusters, wondering what she was about. He soon saw, and watched her with pleasure, thinking that she never looked prettier than now.

Presently she caught him at it, and hastened to explain, telling what she had heard, and how she was trying to atone for her past neglect of these young neighbors. Then she said good-night, and both went into their rooms, she to sleep happily, and he to smoke as usual.

But his eye kept turning to some of the "nice little bundles" that lay on his table, as if the story he had heard suggested how he might follow Miss Kent's example. I rather think he would not have disturbed himself if he had not heard the story told in such a soft voice, with a pair of bright eyes full of pity looking into his, for little girls were not particularly interesting to him, and he was usually too tired to notice the industrious creatures toiling up and down stairs on various errands, or sewing at the long red seams.

Now that he knew something of their small troubles, he felt as if it would please Miss Kent, and be a good joke, to do his share of the pretty work she had begun.

So presently he jumped up, and, opening his parcels, took out two oranges and two bunches of grapes, then he looked up two silver half-dollars, and stealing into the hall, laid the fruit upon the towel, and the money atop of the oranges. This addition improved the display very much, and Mr. Chrome was stealing back, well pleased, when his eye fell on Miss Kent's door, and he said to himself, "She too shall have a little surprise, for she is a dear, kind-hearted soul."

In his room was a prettily painted plate, and this he filled with green and purple grapes, tucked a sentimental note underneath, and leaving it on her threshold, crept away as stealthily as a burglar.

The house was very quiet when Mrs. Smith, the landlady, came up to turn off the gas. "Well, upon my word, here's fine doings, to be sure!" she said, when she saw the state of the upper hall. "Now I wouldn't have thought it

of Miss Kent, she is such a giddy girl, nor of Mr. Chrome, he is so busy with his own affairs. I meant to give those children each a cake to-morrow, they are such good little things. I'll run down and get them now, as my contribution to this fine set out."

Away trotted Mrs. Smith to her pantry, and picked out a couple of tempting cakes, shaped like hearts and full of plums. There was a goodly array of pies on the shelves, and she took two of them, saying, as she climbed the stairs again, "They remembered the children, so I'll remember them, and have my share of the fun."

So up went the pies, for Mrs. Smith had not much to give, and her spirit was generous, though her pastry was not of the best. It looked very droll to see pies sitting about on the thresholds of closed doors, but the cakes were quite elegant, and filled up the corners of the towel handsomely, for the apron lay in the middle, with the oranges right and left, like two sentinels in yellow uniforms.

It was very late when the flicker of a candle came up stairs, and a pale lady, with a sweet sad face, appeared, bringing a pair of red and a pair of blue mittens for her Dolly and Polly. Poor Mrs. Blake did have a hard time, for she stood all day in a great store that she might earn bread for the poor children who staid at home and took care of one another.

Her heart was very heavy that night, because it was the first Christmas she had ever known without gifts and festivity of some sort. But Petkin, the youngest child, had been ill, times were very hard, the little mouths gaped for food like the bills of hungry birds, and there was no tender mate to help fill them.

If any elves had been hovering about the dingy hall just then, they would have seen the mother's tired face brighten beautifully when she discovered the gifts, and found that her little girls had been so kindly remembered. Something more brilliant than the mock diamonds in Miss Kent's best earrings fell and glittered on the dusty floor as Mrs. Blake added the mittens to the other things, and went to her lonely room again, smiling as she thought how she could thank them all in a sweet and simple way.

Her windows were full of flowers, for the delicate tastes of the poor lady found great comfort in their beauty. "I have nothing else to give, and these will show how grateful I am," she said, as she rejoiced that the scarlet geraniums were so full of gay clusters, the white chrysanthemum stars were all out, and the pink roses at their loveliest.

They slept now, dreaming of a sunny morrow as they sat safely sheltered from the bitter cold. But that night was their last, for a gentle hand cut them all, and soon three pretty nosegays stood in a glass, waiting for dawn, to be laid at three doors, with a few grateful words which would surprise and delight the receivers, for flowers were rare in those hard-working lives, and kind deeds often come back to the givers in fairer shapes than they go.

Now one would think that there had been gifts enough, and no more could possibly arrive, since all had added his or her mite except Betsey, the maid, who was off on a holiday, and the babies fast asleep in their trundle-bed, with nothing to give but love and kisses. Nobody dreamed that the old cat would take it into her head that her kittens were in danger, because Mrs. Smith had said she thought they were nearly old enough to be given away. But she must have understood, for when all was dark and still, the anxious mother went patting up stairs to the children's door, meaning to hide her babies under their bed, sure they would save them from destruction. Mrs. Blake had shut the door, however, so poor Puss was disappointed; but finding a soft, clean spot among a variety of curious articles, she laid her kits there, and kept them warm all night, with her head pillowed on the blue mittens.

In the cold morning Dolly and Polly got up and scrambled into their clothes, not with joyful haste to see what their stockings held, for they had none, but because they had the little ones to dress while mother got the breakfast.

Dolly opened the door, and started back with a cry of astonishment at the lovely spectacle before her. The other people had taken in their gifts, so nothing destroyed the magnificent effect of the treasures so curiously collected in the night. Puss had left her kits asleep, and gone down to get her own breakfast, and there, in the middle of the ruffled apron, as if in a dainty cradle, lay the two Maltese darlings, with white bibs and boots on, and white tips to the tiny tails curled round their little noses in the sweetest way.

Polly and Dolly could only clasp their hands and look in rapturous silence for a minute; then they went down on their knees and revelled in the unexpected richness before them.



"I do believe there *is* a Santa Claus, and that he heard us, for here is everything we wanted," said Dolly, holding the carnelian heart in one hand and the plummy one in the other.

"It must have been some kind of a fairy, for we didn't mention kittens, but we wanted one, and here are two darlings," cried Polly, almost purring with delight as the downy bunches unrolled and gaped till their bits of pink tongues were visible.

"Mrs. Smith was one fairy, I guess, and Miss Kent was another, for that is her apron. I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Chrome gave us the oranges and the money: men always have lots, and his name is on this bit of paper," said Dolly.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad! Now we shall have a Christmas like other people, and I'll never say again that rich folks don't remember poor folks. Come and show all our treasures to mother and the babies; they must have some," answered Polly, feeling that the world was all right, and life not half as hard as she thought it last night.

Shrieks of delight greeted the sisters, and all that morning there was joy and feasting in Mrs. Blake's room, and in the afternoon Dolly and Polly went to the Museum, and actually saw *Puss in Boots*; for their mother insisted on their going, having discovered how the hard-earned quarters had been spent. This was such un hoped-for bliss that they could hardly believe it, and kept smiling at one another so brightly that people wondered who the happy little girls in shabby cloaks could be who clapped their new mittens so heartily, and laughed till it was better than music to hear them.

This was a very remarkable Christmas-day, and they long remembered it; for while they were absorbed in the fortunes of the Marquis of Carabas and the funny cat, who tucked his tail in his belt, washed his face so awkwardly, and didn't know how to purr, strange things were happening at home, and more surprises were in store for our little friends. You see, when people once begin to do kindnesses, it is so easy and pleasant they find it hard to leave off; and sometimes it beautifies them so that they find they love one another very much—as Mr. Chrome and Miss Kent did, though we have nothing to do with that except to tell how they made the poor little tree grow and blossom.

They were very jolly at dinner, and talked a good deal about the Blakes, who ate in their own rooms. Miss Kent told what the children said, and it touched the soft spot in all their hearts to hear about the red shirts, though they laughed at Polly's lament over the bird with only one feather in its tail.

"I'd give them a better tree if I had any place to put it, and knew how to trim it up," said Mr. Chrome, with a sudden burst of generosity, which so pleased Miss Kent that her eyes shone like Christmas candles.

"Put it in the back parlor. All the Browns are away for a week, and we'll help you trim it—won't we, my dear?" cried Mrs. Smith, warmly; for she saw that he was in a sociable mood, and thought it a pity that the Blakes should not profit by it.

"Yes, indeed; I should like it of all things, and it needn't cost much, for I have some skill in trimmings, as you know." And Miss Kent looked so gay and pretty as she spoke that Mr. Chrome made up his mind that millinery must be a delightful occupation.

"Come on then, ladies, and we'll have a little frolic. I'm a lonely old bachelor, with nowhere to go to-day, and I'd like some fun."

They had it, I assure you; for they all fell to work as busy as bees, flying and buzzing about with much laughter as they worked their pleasant miracle. Mr. Chrome acted more like the father of a large family than a crusty bachelor, Miss Kent's skillful fingers flew as they never did before, and Mrs. Smith trotted up and down as briskly as if she were sixteen instead of being a stout old woman of sixty.

The children were so full of the play, and telling all about it, that they forgot their tree till after supper; but when they went to look for it they found it gone, and in its place a great paper hand with one finger pointing down stairs, and on it these mysterious words in red ink:

"Look in the Browns' back parlor!"

At the door of that interesting apartment they found their mother with Will and Petkin, for another hand had suddenly appeared to them pointing up. The door flew open quite as if it were a fairy play, and they went in to find a pretty tree planted in a red box on the centre table, lighted with candles, hung with gilded nuts, red apples, gay bonbons, and a gift for each.

Mr. Chrome was hidden behind one folding-door, and fat Mrs. Smith squeezed behind the other, and they both thought it a great improvement

upon the old-fashioned Santa Claus to have Miss Kent, in the white dress she made for the party, with Mrs. Blake's roses in her hair, step forward as the children gazed in silent rapture, and with a few sweet words welcome them to the little surprise their friends had made.

There were many Christmas trees in the city that night, but none which gave such hearty pleasure as the one which so magically took the place of the broken branch and its few poor toys. They were all there, however, and Dolly and Polly were immensely pleased to see that of all her gifts Petkin chose the forlorn bird to carry to bed with her, the one yellow feather being just to her taste.

Mrs. Blake put on her neat bonnet, and was so gratified that Miss Kent thought it the most successful one she ever trimmed. She was well paid for it by the thanks of one neighbor and the admiration of another; for when she went to her party Mr. Chrome went with her, and said something on the way which made her heart dance more lightly than her feet that night.

Good Mrs. Smith felt that her house had covered itself with glory by this event, and Dolly and Polly declared that it was the most perfect and delightful surprise party ever seen.

It was all over by nine o'clock, and with good-night kisses for every one the little girls climbed up to bed laden with treasures and too happy for many words. But as they tied their round caps Dolly said, thoughtfully:

"On the whole, I think it's rather nice to be poor when people are kind to you."

"Well, I'd *rather* be rich; but if I can't be, it is very good fun to have Christmas trees like this one," answered truthful Polly, never guessing that they had planted the seed from which the little pine-tree grew so quickly and beautifully.

When the moon came to look in at the window on her nightly round, two smiling faces lay on the pillow, which was no longer wet with tears, but rather knobby with the mine of riches hidden underneath,—first fruits of the neighborly friendship which flourished in that house until another and a merrier Christmas came.

# Victory Unintentional

Isaac Asimov

The spaceship leaked, as the saying goes, like a sieve. It was supposed to. In fact, that was the whole idea. The result, of course, was that during the journey from Ganymede to Jupiter, the ship was crammed just as full as it could be with the very hardest space vacuum. And since the ship also lacked heating devices, this space vacuum was at normal temperature, which is a fraction of a degree above absolute zero.

This, also, was according to plan. Little things like the absence of heat and air didn't annoy anyone at all on the particular spaceship.

The first near vacuum wisps of Jovian atmosphere began percolating into the ship several thousand miles above the Jovian surface. It was practically all hydrogen, though perhaps a careful gas analysis might have located a trace of helium as well. The pressure gauges began creeping skyward.

That creep continued at an accelerating pace as the ship dropped downward in a Jupiter-circling spiral. The pointers of successive gauges, each designed for progressively higher pressures, began to move until they reached the neighborhood of a million or so atmospheres, where figures lost most of their meaning. The temperature, as recorded by thermocouples, rose slowly and erratically, and finally steadied at about seventy below zero, Centigrade.

The ship moved slowly toward the end, plowing its way heavily through a maze of gas molecules that crowded together so closely that hydrogen itself was squeezed to the density of a liquid. Ammonia vapor, drawn from the incredibly vast oceans of that liquid, saturated the horrible atmosphere. The wind, which had begun a thousand miles higher, had risen to a pitch inadequately described as a hurricane.

It was quite plain long before the ship landed on a fairly large Jovian island, perhaps seven times the size of Asia, that Jupiter was not a very pleasant world.

And yet the three members of the crew thought it was. They were quite convinced it was. But then, the three members of the crew were not exactly human. And neither were they exactly Jovian.

They were simply robots, designed on Earth for Jupiter. ZZ Three said, "It appears to be a rather desolate place." ZZ Two joined him and regarded the

wind-blasted landscape somberly. "There are structures of some sort in the distance," he said, "which are obviously artificial. I suggest we wait for the inhabitants to come to us."

Across the room ZZ One listened, but made no reply. He was the first constructed of the three, and half experimental. Consequently he spoke a little less frequently than his two companions.

The wait was not long. An air vessel of queer design swooped overhead. More followed. And then a line of ground vehicles approached, took position, and disgorged organisms. Along with these organisms came various inanimate accessories that might have been weapons. Some of these were borne by a single Jovian, some by several, and some advanced under their own power, with Jovians perhaps inside.

The robots couldn't tell. ZZ Three said, "They're all around us now. The logical peaceful gesture would be to come out in the open. Agreed?"

It was, and ZZ One shoved open the heavy door, which was not double or, for that matter, particularly airtight.

Their appearance through the door was the signal for an excited stir among the surrounding Jovians. Things were done to several of the very largest of the inanimate accessories, and ZZ Three became aware of a temperature rise on the outer rind of his beryllium-iridium-bronze body.

He glanced at ZZ Two. "Do you feel it? They're aiming heat energy at us, I believe."

ZZ Two indicated his surprise. "I wonder why?"

"Definitely a heat ray of some sort. Look at that!" One of the rays had been jarred out of alignment for some undiscernible cause, and its line of radiation intersected a brook of sparkling pure ammonia-- which promptly boiled furiously.

Three turned to ZZ One, "Make a note of this, One, will you?"

"Sure." It was to ZZ One that the routine secretarial work fell, and his method of taking a note was to make a mental addition to the accurate memory scroll within him. He had already gathered the hour-by-hour record of every important instrument on board ship during the trip to Jupiter. He added agreeably, "What reason shall I put for the reaction? The human masters would probably enjoy knowing."

"No reason. Or better," Three corrected himself, "no apparent reason. You might say the maximum temperature of the ray was about plus thirty, Centigrade."

Two interrupted, "Shall we try communicating?"

“It would be a waste of time,” said Three. “There can’t be more than a very few Jovians who know the radio-click code that’s been developed between Jupiter and Ganymede. They’ll have to send for one, and when he comes, he’ll establish contact soon enough. Meanwhile let’s watch them. I don’t understand their actions, I tell you frankly.”

Nor did understanding come immediately. Heat radiation ceased, and other instruments were brought to the forefront and put into play. Several capsules fell at the feet of the watching robots, dropping rapidly and forcefully under Jupiter’s gravity. They popped open and a blue liquid exuded, forming pools which proceeded to shrink rapidly by evaporation.

The nightmare wind whipped the vapors away and where those vapors went, Jovians scrambled out of the way. One was too slow, threshed about wildly, and became very limp and still.

ZZ Two bent, dabbed a finger in one of the pools and stared at the dripping liquid. “I think this is oxygen,” he said.

“Oxygen, all right,” agreed Three. “This becomes stranger and stranger. It must certainly be a dangerous practice, for I would say that oxygen is poisonous to the creatures. One of them died!”

There was a pause, and then ZZ One, whose greater simplicity led at times to an increased directness of thought, said heavily, “It might be that these strange creatures in a rather childish way are attempting to destroy us.”

And Two, struck by the suggestion, answered, “You know, One, I think you’re right!”

There had been a slight lull in Jovian activity and now a new structure was brought up. It possessed a slender rod that pointed skyward through the impenetrable Jovian murk. It stood in that starkly incredible wind with a rigidity that plainly indicated remarkable structural strength. From its tip came a cracking and then a Bash that lit up the depths of the atmosphere into a gray fog.

For a moment the robots were bathed in clinging radiance and then Three said thoughtfully, “High-tension electricity! Quite respectable power, too. One, I think you’re right. After all, the human masters have told us that these creatures seek to destroy all humanity, and organisms possessing such insane viciousness as to harbor a thought of harm against a human being”--his voice trembled at the thought--“would scarcely scruple at attempting to destroy us.”

“It’s a shame to have such distorted minds,” said ZZ One. “Poor fellows!”

“I find it a very saddening thought,” admitted Two. “Let’s go back to the ship. We’ve seen enough for now.”

They did so, and settled down to wait. As ZZ Three said, Jupiter was a roomy planet, and it might take time for Jovian transportation to bring a radio code expert to the ship. However, patience is a cheap commodity to robots.

As a matter of fact, Jupiter turned on its axis three times, according to chronometer, before the expert arrived. The rising and setting of the sun made no difference, of course, to the dead darkness at the bottom of three thousand miles of liquid-dense gas, so that one could not speak of day and night. But then, neither Jovian nor robot saw by visible light radiation and that didn’t matter.

Through this thirty-hour interval the surrounding Jovians continued their attack with a patience and persevering relentlessness concerning which robot ZZ One made a good many mental notes. The ship was assaulted by as many varieties of forces as there were hours, and the robots observed every attack attentively, analyzing such weapons as they recognized. They by no means recognized all.

But the human masters had built well. It had taken fifteen years to construct the ship and the robots, and their essentials could be expressed in a single phrase-- raw strength. The attack spent itself uselessly and neither ship nor robot seemed the worse for it.

Three said, “This atmosphere handicaps them, I think. They can’t use atomic disruptors, since they would only tear a hole in that soupy air and blow themselves up.”

“They haven’t used high explosives either,” said Two, “which is well. They couldn’t have hurt us, naturally, but it would have thrown us about a bit.”

“High explosives are out of the question. You can’t have an explosive without gas expansion and gas just can’t expand in this atmosphere.”

“It’s a very good atmosphere,” muttered One. “I like it.” Which was natural, because he was built for it. The ZZ robots were the first robots ever turned out by the United States Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation that were not even faintly human in appearance. They were low and squat, with a center of gravity less than a foot above ground level. They had six legs apiece, stumpy and thick, designed to lift tons against two and a half times normal Earth gravity. Their reflexes were that many times Earth-normal speed, to make up for the gravity. And they were composed of a beryllium-iridium-bronze alloy that was proof against any

known corrosive agent, also any known destructive agent short of a thousand-megaton atomic disruptor, under any conditions whatsoever.

To dispense with further description, they were indestructible, and so impressively powerful that they were the only robots ever built on whom the roboticists of the corporation had never quite had the nerve to pin a serial-number nickname. One bright young fellow had suggested Sissy One, Two, and Three--but not in a very loud voice, and the suggestion was never repeated.

The last hours of the wait were spent in a puzzled discussion to find a possible description of a Jovian's appearance. ZZ One had made a note of their possession of tentacles and of their radial symmetry--and there he had struck. Two and Three did their best, but couldn't help.

"You can't very well describe anything," Three declared finally, "without a standard of reference. These creatures are like nothing I know of--completely outside the postitronic paths of my brain. It's like trying to describe gamma light to a robot unequipped for gamma-ray reception."

It was just at that time that the weapon barrage ceased once more. The robots turned their attention to outside the ship.

A group of Jovians were advancing in curiously uneven fashion, but no amount of careful watching could determine the exact method of their locomotion. How they used their tentacles was uncertain. At times the organisms took on a remarkable slithering motion, and then they moved at great speed, perhaps with the wind's help, for they were moving downwind.

The robots stepped out to meet the Jovians, who halted ten feet away. Both sides remained silent and motionless. ZZ Two said, "They must be watching us, but I don't know how. Do either of you see any photosensitive organs?"

"I can't say," grunted Three in response. "I don't see anything about them that makes sense at all."

There was a sudden metallic clicking from among the Jovian group and ZZ One said delightedly, "It's the radio code. They've got the communications expert here."

It was, and they had. The complicated dot-dash system that over a period of twenty-five years had been laboriously developed by the beings of Jupiter and the Earthmen of Ganymede into a remarkably flexible means of communication was finally being put into practice at close range.



One Jovian remained in the forefront now, the others having fallen back. It was he that was speaking. The clicking said, "Where are you from?"

ZZ Three, as the most mentally advanced, naturally assumed spokesmanship for the robot group. "We are from Jupiter's satellite, Ganymede."

The Jovian continued, "What do you want?"

"Information. We have come to study your world and to bring back our findings. If we could have your cooperation--"

The Jovian clicking interrupted. "You must be destroyed!"

ZZ Three paused and said in a thoughtful aside to his two companions, "Exactly the attitude the human masters said they would take. They are very unusual."

Returning to his clicking, he asked simply, "Why?"

The Jovian evidently considered certain questions too obnoxious to be answered. He said, "If you leave within a single period of revolution, we will spare you-- until such time as we emerge from our world to destroy the un-Jovian vermin of Ganymede."

"I would like to point out," said Three, "that we of Ganymede and the inner planets--"

The Jovian interrupted, "Our astronomy knows of the Sun and of our four satellites. There are no inner planets."

Three conceded the point wearily, "We of Ganymede, then. We have no designs on Jupiter. We're prepared to offer friendship. For twenty-five years your people communicated freely with the human beings of Ganymede. Is there any reason to make sudden war upon the humans?"

"For twenty-five years," was the cold response, "we assumed the inhabitants of Ganymede to be Jovians. When we found out they were not, and that we had been treating lower animals on the scale of Jovian intelligences, we were bound to take steps to wipe out the dishonor."

Slowly and forcefully he finished, "We of Jupiter will suffer the existence of no vermin!"

The Jovian was backing away in some fashion, tacking against the wind, and the interview was evidently over. The robots retreated inside the ship.

ZZ Two said, "It looks bad, doesn't it?" He continued thoughtfully, "It is as the human masters said. They possess an ultimately developed superiority complex, combined with an extreme intolerance for anyone or anything that disturbs that complex."

“The intolerance,” observed Three, “is the natural consequence of the complex. The trouble is that their intolerance has teeth in it. They have weapons-- and their science is great.”

“I am not surprised now,” burst out ZZ One, “that we were specifically instructed to disregard Jovian orders. They are horrible, intolerant, pseudo-superior beings!” He added emphatically, with robotical loyalty and faith, “No human master could ever be like that.”

“That, though true, is beside the point,” said Three. “The fact remains that the human masters are in terrible danger. This is a gigantic world and these Jovians are greater in numbers and resources by a hundred times or more than the humans of the entire Terrestrial Empire. If they can ever develop the force field to the point where they can use it as a spaceship hull-- as the human masters have already done-- they will overrun the system at will. The question remains as to how far they have advanced in that direction, what other weapons they have, what preparations they are making, and so on. To return with that information is our function, of course, and we had better decide on our next step.”

“It may be difficult,” said Two. “The Jovians won’t help us.” Which, at the moment, was rather an understatement.

Three thought awhile. “It seems to me that we need only wait,” he observed. “They have tried to destroy us for thirty hours now and haven’t succeeded. Certainly they have done their best. Now a superiority complex always involves the eternal necessity of saving face, and the ultimatum given us proves it in this case. They would never allow us to leave if they could destroy us. But if we don’t leave, then rather than admit they cannot force us away, they will surely pretend that they are willing, for their own purposes, to have us stay.”

Once again they waited. The day passed. The weapon barrage did not resume. The robots did not leave. The bluff was called. And now the robots faced the Jovian radio-code expert once again.

If the ZZ models had been equipped with a sense of humor, they would have enjoyed themselves immensely. As it was, they felt merely a solemn sense of satisfaction.

The Jovian said, “It has been our decision that you will be allowed to remain for a very short time, so that you see our power for yourself. You shall then return to Ganymede to inform your companion vermin of the disastrous end to which they will unfailingly come within a solar revolution.”

ZZ One made a mental note that a Jovian revolution took twelve earthly years.

Three replied casually, "Thank you. May we accompany you to the nearest town? There are many things we would like to learn." He added as an afterthought, "Our ship is not to be touched, of course."

He said this as a request, not as a threat, for no ZZ model was ever pugnacious. All capacity for even the slightest annoyance had been carefully barred in their construction. With robots as vastly powerful as the ZZ's, unfailing good temper was essential for safety during the years of testing on Earth.

The Jovian said, "We are not interested in your verminous ship. No Jovian will pollute himself by approaching it. You may accompany us, but you must on no account approach closer than ten feet to any Jovian, or you will be instantly destroyed."

"Stuck up, aren't they?" observed Two in a genial whisper, as they plowed into the wind.

The town was a port on the shores of an incredible ammonia lake. The external wind whipped furious, frothy waves that shot across the liquid surface at the hectic rate enforced by the gravity. The port itself was neither large nor impressive and it seemed fairly evident that most of the construction was underground.

"What is the population of this place?" asked Three.

The Jovian replied, "It is a small town of ten million."

"I see. Make a note of that, One." ZZ One did so mechanically, and then turned once more to the lake, at which he had been staring in fascination. He pulled at Three's elbow. "Say, do you suppose they have fish here?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I think we ought to know. The human masters ordered us to find out everything we could." Of the robots, One was the simplest and, consequently, the one who took orders in the most literal fashion.

Two said, "Let One go and look if he likes. It won't do any harm if we let the kid have his fun."

"All right. There's no real objection if he doesn't waste his time. Fish aren't what we came for--but go ahead, One."

ZZ One made off in great excitement and slogged rapidly down the beach, plunging into the ammonia with a splash. The Jovians watched attentively. They had understood none of the previous conversation, of course.

The radio code expert clicked out, "It is apparent that your companion has decided to abandon life in despair at our greatness."

Three said in surprise, "Nothing of the sort. He wants to investigate the living organisms, if any, that live in the ammonia." He added apologetically, "Our friend is very curious at times, and he isn't quite as bright as we are, though that is only his misfortune. We understand that and try to humor him whenever we can."

There was a long pause, and the Jovian observed, "He will drown." Three replied casually, "No danger of that. We don't drown. May we enter the town as soon as he returns?"

At that moment there was a spurt of liquid several hundred feet out in the lake. It sprayed upward wildly and then hurtled down in a wind-driven mist. Another spurt and another, then a wild white foaming that formed a trail toward shore, gradually quieting as it approached.

The two robots watched this in amazement, and the utter lack of motion on the part of the Jovians indicated that they were watching as well.

Then the head of ZZ One broke the surface and he made his slow way out on to dry land. But something followed him! Some organism of gigantic size that seemed nothing but fangs, claws, and spines. Then they saw that it wasn't following him under its own power, but was being dragged across the beach by ZZ One. There was a significant flabbiness about it.

ZZ One approached rather timidly and took communication into his own hands. He tapped out a message to the Jovian in agitated fashion. "I am very sorry this happened, but the thing attacked me. I was merely taking notes on it. It is not a valuable creature, I hope."

He was not answered immediately, for at the first appearance of the monster there had been a wild break in the Jovian ranks. These reformed slowly, and cautious observation having proven the creator to be indeed dead, order was restored. Some of the bolder were curiously prodding the body.

ZZ Three said humbly, "I hope you will pardon our friend. He is sometimes clumsy. We have absolutely no intention of harming any Jovian creature."

"He attacked me," explained One. "He bit at me without provocation. See!" And he displayed a two-foot fang that ended in a jagged break. "He broke it on my shoulder and almost left a scratch. I just slapped it a bit to send it away-- and it died. I'm sorry!"

The Jovian finally spoke, and his code clicking was a rather stuttery affair. "It is a wild creature, rarely found so close to shore, but the lake is deep just here."

Three said, still anxiously, "If you can use it for food, we are only too glad--" "No. We can get food for ourselves without the help of verm--without the help of others. Eat it yourselves."

At that ZZ One heaved the creature up and back into the sea, with an easy motion of one arm. Three said casually, "Thank you for your kind offer, but we have no use for food. We don't eat, of course."

Escorted by two hundred or so armed Jovians, the robots passed down a series of ramps into the underground city. If, above the surface, the city had looked small and unimpressive, then from beneath it took on the appearance of a vast megalopolis.

They were ushered into ground cars that were operated by remote control--for no honest, self-respecting Jovian would risk his superiority by placing himself in the same car with vermin-- and driven at frightful speed to the center of the town. They saw enough to decide that it extended fifty miles from end to end and reached downward into Jupiter's crust at least eight miles.

ZZ Two did not sound happy as he said, "If this is a sample of Jovian development then we shall not have a hopeful report to bring back to the human masters. After all, we landed on the vast surface of Jupiter at random, with the chances a thousand to one against coming near any really concentrated center of population. This must be, as the code expert says, a mere town."

"Ten million Jovians," said Three abstractedly. "Total population must be in the trillions, which is high, very high, even for Jupiter. They probably have a completely urban civilization, which means that their scientific development must be tremendous. If they have force fields--"

Three had no neck, for in the interest of strength the heads of the ZZ models were riveted firmly onto the torso, with the delicate positronic brains protected by three separate layers in inch-thick iridium alloy. But if he had had one, he would have shaken his head dolefully.

They had stopped now in a cleared space. Everywhere about them they could see avenues and structures crowded with Jovians, as curious as any terrestrial crowd would have been in similar circumstances.

The code expert approached. "It is time now for me to retire until the next period of activity. We have gone so far as to arrange quarters for you

at great inconvenience to ourselves for, of course, the structure will have to be pulled down and rebuilt afterward. Nevertheless, you will be allowed to sleep for a space.”

ZZ Three waved an arm in deprecation and tapped out, “We thank you but you must not trouble yourself. We don’t mind remaining right here. If you want to sleep and rest, by all means do. We’ll wait for you. As for us,” casually, “we don’t sleep.”

The Jovian said nothing, though if it had had a face, the expression upon it might have been interesting. It left, and the robots remained in the car, with squads of well-armed Jovians, frequently replaced, surrounding them as guards.

It was hours before the ranks of those guards parted to allow the code expert to return. Along with him were other Jovians, whom he introduced. “There are with me two officials of the central government who have graciously consented to speak with you.”

One of the officials evidently knew the code, for his clicking interrupted the code expert sharply. He addressed the robots, “Vermin! Emerge from the ground car that we may look at you.”

The robots were only too willing to comply, so while Three and Two vaulted over the right side of the car, ZZ One dashed through the left side. The word through is used advisedly, for since he neglected to work the mechanism that lowered a section of side so that one might exit, he carried that side, plus two wheels and an axle, along with him. The car collapsed, and ZZ One stood staring at the ruins in embarrassed silence.

At last he clicked out gently, “I’m very sorry. I hope it wasn’t an expensive car.”

ZZ Two added apologetically, “Our companion is often clumsy. You must excuse him,” and ZZ Three made a halfhearted attempt to put the car back together again.

ZZ One made another effort to excuse himself. “The material of the car was rather flimsy. You see?” He lifted a square-yard sheet of three-inch-thick, metal-hard plastic in both hands and exerted a bit of pressure. The sheet promptly snapped in two. “I should have made allowances,” he admitted.

The Jovian government official said in slightly less sharp fashion, “The car would have had to be destroyed anyway, after being polluted by your presence.” He paused, then, “Creatures! We Jovians lack vulgar curiosity concerning lower animals, but our scientists seek facts.”

“We’re right with you,” replied Three cheerfully. “So do we.” The Jovian ignored him. “You lack the mass-sensitive organ, apparently. How is it that you are aware of distant objects?”

Three grew interested. “Do you mean your people are directly sensitive to mass?”

“I am not here to answer your questions-- your impudent questions-- about us.”

“I take it then that objects of low specific mass would be transparent to you, even in the absence of radiation.” He turned to Two, “That’s how they see. Their atmosphere is as transparent as space to them.”

The Jovian clicking began once more, “You will answer my first question immediately, or my patience will end and I will order you destroyed.”

Three said at once, “We are energy-sensitive, Jovian. We can adjust ourselves to the entire electromagnetic scale at will. At present, our long-distance sight is due to radio-wave radiation that we emit ourselves, and at close range we see by--” He paused, and said to Two, “There isn’t any code word for gamma ray, is there?”

“Not that I know of,” Two answered. Three continued to the Jovian, “At close range we see by other radiation for which there is no code word.”

“Of what is your body composed?” demanded the Jovian.

Two whispered, “He probably asks that because his mass sensitivity can’t penetrate past our skin. High density, you know. Ought we to tell him?”

Three replied uncertainly, “Our human masters didn’t particularly say we were to keep anything secret.” In radio code, to the Jovian he said, “We are mostly iridium. For the rest, copper, tin, a little beryllium, and a scattering of other substances.”

The Jovians fell back and by the obscure writhing of various portions of their thoroughly indescribable bodies gave the impression that they were in animated conversation, although they made no sound.

And then the official returned. “Beings of Ganymede! It has been decided to show you through some of our factories that we may exhibit a tiny part of our great achievements. We will then allow you to return so that you may spread despair among the other verm--the other beings of the outer world.”

Three said to Two, “Note the effect of their psychology. They must hammer home their superiority. It’s still a matter of saving face.” And in radio code, “We thank you for the opportunity.”

But the face saving was efficient, as the robots realized soon enough. The demonstration became a tour, and the tour a Grand Exhibition. The Jovians displayed everything, explained everything, answered all questions eagerly, and ZZ One made hundreds of despairing notes.

The war potential of that single so-called unimportant town was greater by several times than that of all Ganymede. Ten more such towns would outproduce all the Terrestrial Empire. Yet ten more such towns would not be the fingernail fragment of the strength all Jupiter must be able to exert.

Three turned as One nudged him. "What is it?"

ZZ One said seriously, "If they have force fields, the human masters are lost, aren't they?"

"I'm afraid so. Why do you ask?"

"Because the Jovians aren't showing us through the right wing of this factory. It might be that force fields are being developed there. They would be wanting to keep it secret if they were. We'd better find out. It's the main point, you know."

Three regarded One somberly. "Perhaps you're right. It's no use ignoring anything."

They were in a huge steel mill now, watching hundred-foot beams of ammonia-resistant silicon-steel alloy being turned out twenty to the second. Three asked quietly, "What does that wing contain?"

The government official inquired of those in charge of the factory and explained, "That is the section of great heat. Various processes require huge temperatures which life cannot bear, and they must all be handled indirectly."

He led the way to a partition from which heat could be felt to radiate and indicated a small round area of transparent material. It was one of a row of such, through which the foggy red light of lines of glowing forges could be made out through the soupy atmosphere.

ZZ One fastened a look of suspicion on the Jovian and clicked out, "Would it be all right if I went in and looked around? I am very interested in this."

Three said, "You're being childish, One. They're telling the truth. Oh well, nose around if you must. But don't take too long; we've got to move on."

The Jovian said, "You have no understanding of the heat involved. You will die."

"Oh no," explained One casually. "Heat doesn't bother us." There was a Jovian conference, and then a scene of scurrying confusion as the life of the factory was geared to this unusual emergency. Screens of heat-absorbent



material were set up, and then a door dropped open, a door that had never before budged while the forges were working.

ZZ One entered and the door closed behind him. Jovian officials crowded to the transparent areas to watch. ZZ One walked to the nearest forge and tapped the outside. Since he was too short to see into it comfortably, he tipped the forge until the molten metal licked at the lip of the container. He peered at it curiously, then dipped his hand in and stirred it awhile to test the consistency. Having done this, he withdrew his hand, shook off some of the fiery metallic droplets and wiped the rest on one of his six thighs. Slowly he went down the line of forges, then signified his desire to leave.

The Jovians retired to a great distance when he came out of the door and played a stream of ammonia on him, which hissed, bubbled and steamed until he was brought to bearable temperature once more.

ZZ One ignored the ammonia shower and said, "They were telling the truth. No force fields."

Three began, "You see--" but One interrupted impatiently, "But there's no use delaying. The human masters instructed us to find out everything and that's that."

He turned to the Jovian and clicked out, without the slightest hesitation, "Listen, has Jovian science developed force fields?"

Bluntness was, of course, one of the natural consequences of One's less well developed mental powers. Two and Three knew that, so they refrained from expressing disapproval of the remark.

The Jovian official relaxed slowly from his strangely stiffened attitude, which had somehow given the impression that he had been staring stupidly at One's hand--the one he had dipped into the molten metal. The Jovian said slowly, "Force fields? That, then, is your main object of curiosity?"

"Yes," said One with emphasis. There was a sudden and patent gain in confidence on the Jovian's part, for the clicking grew sharper. "Then come, vermin!"

Whereupon Three said to Two, "We're vermin again, I see, which sounds as if there's bad news ahead." And Two gloomily agreed.

It was to the very edge of the city that they were now led-- to the portion which on Earth would have been termed the suburbs-- and into one of a series of closely integrated structures, which might have corresponded vaguely to a terrestrial university. There were no explanations, however, and none was asked for. The Jovian official led the way rapidly, and the

robots followed with the grim conviction that the worst was just about to happen.

It was ZZ One who stopped before an opened wall section after the rest had passed on. "What's this?" he wanted to know.

The room was equipped with narrow, low benches, along which Jovians manipulated rows of strange devices, of which strong, inch-long electromagnets formed the principal feature.

"What's this?" asked One again.

The Jovian turned back and exhibited impatience. "This is a students' biological laboratory. There's nothing there to interest you."

"But what are they doing?" "They are studying microscopic life. Haven't you ever seen a microscope before?"

Three interrupted in explanation, "He has, but not that type. Our microscopes are meant for energy-sensitive organs and work by refraction of radiant energy. Your microscopes evidently work on a mass-expansion basis. Rather ingenious."

ZZ One said, "Would it be all right if I inspected some of your specimens?"

"Of what use will that be? You cannot use our microscopes because of your sensory limitations and it will simply force us to discard such specimens as you approach for no decent reason."

"But I don't need a microscope," explained One, with surprise. "I can easily adjust myself for microscopic vision."

He strode to the nearest bench, while the students in the room crowded to the corner in an attempt to avoid contamination. ZZ One shoved a microscope aside and inspected the slide carefully. He backed away, puzzled, then tried another...a third...a fourth.

He came back and addressed the Jovian. "Those are supposed to be alive, aren't they? I mean those little worm things."

The Jovian said, "Certainly."

"That's strange-- when I look at them, they die!"

Three exclaimed sharply and said to his two companions, "We've forgotten our gammaray radiation. Let's get out of here, One, or we'll kill every bit of microscopic life in the room."

He turned to the Jovian, "I'm afraid that our presence is fatal to weaker forms of life. We had better leave. We hope the specimens are not too difficult to replace. And, while we're about it, you had better not stay too

near us, or our radiation may affect you adversely. You feel all right so far, don't you?" he asked.

The Jovian led the way onward in proud silence, but it was to be noticed that thereafter he doubled the distance he had hitherto kept between himself and them.

Nothing more was said until the robots found themselves in a vast room. In the very center of it huge ingots of metal rested unsupported in mid-air--or, rather, supported by nothing visible--against mighty Jovian gravity.

The Jovian clicked, "There is your force field in ultimate form, as recently perfected. Within that bubble is a vacuum, so that it is supporting the full weight of our atmosphere plus an amount of metal equivalent to two large spaceships. What do you say to that?"

"That space travel now becomes a possibility for you," said Three.

"Definitely. No metal or plastic has the strength to hold our atmosphere against a vacuum, but a force field can-- and a force-field bubble will be our spaceship. Within the year we will be turning them out by the hundreds of thousands. Then we will swarm down upon Ganymede to destroy the verminous so-called intelligences that attempt to dispute our dominion of the universe."

"The human beings of Ganymede have never attempted--" began Three, in mild expostulation.

"Silence!" snapped the Jovian. "Return now and tell them what you've seen. Their own feeble force fields-- such as the one your ship is equipped with-- will not stand against us, for our smallest ship will be a hundred times the size and power of yours."

Three said, "Then there's nothing more to do and we will return, as you say, with the information. If you could lead us back to our ship, we'll say good-by. But by the way, just as a matter for the record, there's something you don't understand. The humans of Ganymede have force fields, of course, but our particular ship isn't equipped with one. We don't need any."

The robot turned away and motioned his companions to follow. For a moment they did not speak, then ZZ One muttered dejectedly, "Can't we try to destroy this place?"

"It won't help," said Three. "They'd get us by weight of numbers. It's no use. In an earthly decade the human masters will be finished. It is impossible to stand against Jupiter. There's just too much of it. As long as Jovians were tied to the surface, the humans were safe. But now that they

have force fields. All we can do is to bring the news. By the preparation of hiding places, some few may survive for a short while.”

The city was behind them. They were out on the open plain by the lake, with their ship a dark spot on the horizon, when the Jovian spoke suddenly:

“Creatures, you say you have no force field?”

Three replied without interest, “We don’t need one.”

“How then does your ship stand the vacuum of space without exploding because of the atmospheric pressure within?” And he moved a tentacle as if in mute gesture at the Jovian atmosphere that was weighing down upon them with a force of twenty million pounds to the square inch.

“Well,” explained Three, “that’s simple. Our ship isn’t airtight. Pressures equalize within and without.”

“Even in space? A vacuum in your ship? You lie!”

“You’re welcome to inspect our ship. It has no force field and it isn’t airtight. What’s marvelous about that? We don’t breathe. Our energy is obtained through direct atomic power. The presence or absence of air pressure makes little difference to us and we’re quite at home in a vacuum.”

“But absolute zero!”

“It doesn’t matter. We regulate our own heat. We’re not interested in outside temperatures.” He paused. “Well, we can make our own way back to the ship. Good-bye. We’ll give the humans of Ganymede your message--war to the end!”

But the Jovian said, “Wait! I’ll be back.” He turned and went toward the city.

The robots stared, and then waited in silence. It was three hours before he returned and when he did, it was in breathless haste. He stopped within the usual ten feet of the robots, but then began inching his way forward in a curious groveling fashion. He did not speak until his rubbery gray skin was almost touching them, and then the radio code sounded, subdued and respectful.

“Honored sirs, I have been in communication with the head of our central government, who is now aware of all the facts, and I can assure you that Jupiter desires only peace,”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Three blankly.

The Jovian drove on hastily. "We are ready to resume communication with Ganymede and will gladly promise to make no attempt to venture into space. Our force field will be used only on the Jovian surface."

"But--" Three began.

"Our government will be glad to receive any other representatives our honorable human brothers of Ganymede would care to send. If your honors will now condescend to swear peace--" a scaly tentacle swung out toward them and Three, quite dazed, grasped it. Two and One did likewise as two more were extended to them.

The Jovian said solemnly: "There is then eternal peace between Jupiter and Ganymede."

The spaceship which leaked like a sieve was out in space again. The pressure and temperature were once more at zero, and the robots watched the huge but steadily shrinking globe that was Jupiter.

"They're definitely sincere," said ZZ Two, "and it's very gratifying, this complete about-face, but I don't get it."

"It is my idea," observed ZZ One, "that the Jovians came to their senses just in time and realized the incredible evil involved in the thought of harm to a human master. That would be only natural."

ZZ Three sighed and said, "Look, it's all a matter of psychology. Those Jovians had a superiority complex a mile thick and when they couldn't destroy us, they were bound to save face. All their exhibitions, all their explanations, were simply a form of braggadocio, designed to impress us into the proper state of humiliation before their power and superiority."

"I see all that," interrupted Two, "but--" Three went on, "But it worked the wrong way. All they did was to prove to themselves that we were stronger, that we didn't drown, that we didn't eat or sleep, that molten metal didn't hurt us. Even our very presence was fatal to Jovian life. Their last trump was the force field. And when they found out that we didn't need them at all, and could live in a vacuum at absolute zero, they broke." He paused and added philosophically, "When a superiority complex like that breaks, it breaks all the way."

The other two considered that, and then Two said, "But it still doesn't make sense. Why should they care what we can or can't do? We're only robots. We're not the ones they have to fight."

"And that's the whole point, Two," said Three softly. "It's only after we left Jupiter that I thought of it. Do you know that through an oversight, quite unintentionally, we neglected to tell them we were only robots."

“They never asked us,” said One. “Exactly. So they thought we were human beings and that all the other human beings were like us!” He looked once more at Jupiter, thoughtfully. “No wonder they decided to quit!”

# The Child's Story

Charles Dickens

Once upon a time, a good many years ago, there was a traveller, and he set out upon a journey. It was a magic journey, and was to seem very long when he began it, and very short when he got half way through.

He travelled along a rather dark path for some little time, without meeting anything, until at last he came to a beautiful child. So he said to the child, "What do you do here?" And the child said, "I am always at play. Come and play with me!"

So, he played with that child, the whole day long, and they were very merry. The sky was so blue, the sun was so bright, the water was so sparkling, the leaves were so green, the flowers were so lovely, and they heard such singing-birds and saw so many butterflies, that everything was beautiful. This was in fine weather. When it rained, they loved to watch the falling drops, and to smell the fresh scents. When it blew, it was delightful to listen to the wind, and fancy what it said, as it came rushing from its home-- where was that, they wondered!--whistling and howling, driving the clouds before it, bending the trees, rumbling in the chimneys, shaking the house, and making the sea roar in fury. But, when it snowed, that was best of all; for, they liked nothing so well as to look up at the white flakes falling fast and thick, like down from the breasts of millions of white birds; and to see how smooth and deep the drift was; and to listen to the hush upon the paths and roads.

They had plenty of the finest toys in the world, and the most astonishing picture-books: all about scimitars and slippers and turbans, and dwarfs and giants and genii and fairies, and blue-beards and bean-stalks and riches and caverns and forests and Valentines and Orsons: and all new and all true.

But, one day, of a sudden, the traveller lost the child. He called to him over and over again, but got no answer. So, he went upon his road, and went on for a little while without meeting anything, until at last he came to a handsome boy. So, he said to the boy, "What do you do here?" And the boy said, "I am always learning. Come and learn with me."

So he learned with that boy about Jupiter and Juno, and the Greeks and the Romans, and I don't know what, and learned more than I could tell--or he either, for he soon forgot a great deal of it. But, they were not always learning; they had the merriest games that ever were played. They rowed upon the river in summer, and skated on the ice in winter; they were active afoot, and active on horseback; at cricket, and all games at ball; at prisoner's base, hare and hounds, follow my leader, and more sports than I can think of; nobody could beat them. They had holidays too, and Twelfth cakes, and parties where they danced till midnight, and real Theatres where they saw palaces of real gold and silver rise out of the real earth, and saw all the wonders of the world at once. As to friends, they had such dear friends and so many of them, that I want the time to reckon them up. They were all young, like the handsome boy, and were never to be strange to one another all their lives through.

Still, one day, in the midst of all these pleasures, the traveller lost the boy as he had lost the child, and, after calling to him in vain, went on upon his journey. So he went on for a little while without seeing anything, until at last he came to a young man. So, he said to the young man, "What do you do here?" And the young man said, "I am always in love. Come and love with me."

So, he went away with that young man, and presently they came to one of the prettiest girls that ever was seen--just like Fanny in the corner there--and she had eyes like Fanny, and hair like Fanny, and dimples like Fanny's, and she laughed and coloured just as Fanny does while I am talking about her. So, the young man fell in love directly--just as Somebody I won't mention, the first time he came here, did with Fanny. Well! he was teased sometimes--just as Somebody used to be by Fanny; and they



quarrelled sometimes--just as Somebody and Fanny used to quarrel; and they made it up, and sat in the dark, and wrote letters every day, and never were happy asunder, and were always looking out for one another and pretending not to, and were engaged at Christmas-time, and sat close to one another by the fire, and were going to be married very soon--all exactly like Somebody I won't mention, and Fanny!

But, the traveller lost them one day, as he had lost the rest of his friends, and, after calling to them to come back, which they never did, went on upon his journey. So, he went on for a little while without seeing anything, until at last he came to a middle-aged gentleman. So, he said to the gentleman, "What are you doing here?" And his answer was, "I am always busy. Come and be busy with me!"

So, he began to be very busy with that gentleman, and they went on through the wood together. The whole journey was through a wood, only it had been open and green at first, like a wood in spring; and now began to be thick and dark, like a wood in summer; some of the little trees that had come out earliest, were even turning brown. The gentleman was not alone, but had a lady of about the same age with him, who was his Wife; and they had children, who were with them too. So, they all went on together through the wood, cutting down the trees, and making a path through the branches and the fallen leaves, and carrying burdens, and working hard. Sometimes, they came to a long green avenue that opened into deeper woods. Then they would hear a very little, distant voice crying, "Father, father, I am another child! Stop for me!" And presently they would see a very little figure, growing larger as it came along, running to join them. When it came up, they all crowded round it, and kissed and welcomed it; and then they all went on together.

Sometimes, they came to several avenues at once, and then they all stood still, and one of the children said, "Father, I am going to sea," and another said, "Father, I am going to India," and another, "Father, I am going to seek my fortune where I can," and another, "Father, I am going to Heaven!" So, with many tears at parting, they went, solitary, down those avenues, each

child upon its way; and the child who went to Heaven, rose into the golden air and vanished.

Whenever these partings happened, the traveller looked at the gentleman, and saw him glance up at the sky above the trees, where the day was beginning to decline, and the sunset to come on. He saw, too, that his hair was turning grey. But, they never could rest long, for they had their journey to perform, and it was necessary for them to be always busy.

At last, there had been so many partings that there were no children left, and only the traveller, the gentleman, and the lady, went upon their way in company. And now the wood was yellow; and now brown; and the leaves, even of the forest trees, began to fall.

So, they came to an avenue that was darker than the rest, and were pressing forward on their journey without looking down it when the lady stopped.

"My husband," said the lady. "I am called."

They listened, and they heard a voice a long way down the avenue, say, "Mother, mother!"

It was the voice of the first child who had said, "I am going to Heaven!" and the father said, "I pray not yet. The sunset is very near. I pray not yet!"

But, the voice cried, "Mother, mother!" without minding him, though his hair was now quite white, and tears were on his face.

Then, the mother, who was already drawn into the shade of the dark avenue and moving away with her arms still round his neck, kissed him, and said, "My dearest, I am summoned, and I go!" And she was gone. And the traveller and he were left alone together.

And they went on and on together, until they came to very near the end of the wood: so near, that they could see the sunset shining red before them through the trees.

Yet, once more, while he broke his way among the branches, the traveller lost his friend. He called and called, but there was no reply, and when he passed out of the wood, and saw the peaceful sun going down upon a wide purple prospect, he came to an old man sitting on a fallen tree. So, he said to the old man, "What do you do here?" And the old man said with a calm smile, "I am always remembering. Come and remember with me!"

So the traveller sat down by the side of that old man, face to face with the serene sunset; and all his friends came softly back and stood around him. The beautiful child, the handsome boy, the young man in love, the father, mother, and children: every one of them was there, and he had lost nothing. So, he loved them all, and was kind and forbearing with them all, and was always pleased to watch them all, and they all honoured and loved him. And I think the traveller must be yourself, dear Grandfather, because this is what you do to us, and what we do to you.

# A Burglar's Christmas

Willa Cather

Two very shabby looking young men stood at the corner of Prairie Avenue and Eightieth Street, looking despondently at the carriages that whirled by. It was Christmas Eve, and the streets were full of vehicles; florists' wagons, grocers' carts and carriages. The streets were in that half-liquid, half-congealed condition peculiar to the streets of Chicago at that season of the year. The swift wheels that spun by sometimes threw the slush of mud and snow over the two young men who were talking on the corner.

"Well," remarked the elder of the two, "I guess we are at our rope's end, sure enough. How do you feel?"

"Pretty shaky. The wind's sharp tonight. If I had had anything to eat I mightn't mind it so much. There is simply no show. I'm sick of the whole business. Looks like there's nothing for it but the lake."

"O, nonsense, I thought you had more grit. Got anything left you can hock?"

"Nothing but my beard, and I am afraid they wouldn't find it worth a pawn ticket," said the younger man ruefully, rubbing the week's growth of stubble on his face.

"Got any folks anywhere? Now's your time to strike 'em if you have."

"Never mind if I have, they're out of the question."

"Well, you'll be out of it before many hours if you don't make a move of some sort. A man's got to eat. See here, I am going down to Longtin's saloon. I used to play the banjo in there with a couple of coons, and I'll

bone him for some of his free-lunch stuff. You'd better come along, perhaps they'll fill an order for two."

"How far down is it?"

"Well, it's clear downtown, of course, way down on Michigan Avenue."

"Thanks, I guess I'll loaf around here. I don't feel equal to the walk, and the cars well, the cars are crowded." His features drew themselves into what might have been a smile under happier circumstances.

"No, you never did like street cars, you're too aristocratic. See here, Crawford, I don't like leaving you here. You ain't good company for yourself tonight."

"Crawford? O, yes, that's the last one. There have been so many I forget them."

"Have you got a real name, anyway?"

"O, yes, but it's one of the ones I've forgotten. Don't you worry about me. You go along and get your free lunch. I think I had a row in Longtin's place once. I'd better not show myself there again." As he spoke the young man nodded and turned slowly up the avenue.

He was miserable enough to want to be quite alone. Even the crowd that jostled by him annoyed him. He wanted to think about himself. He had avoided this final reckoning with himself for a year now. He had laughed it off and drunk it off. But now, when all those artificial devices which are employed to turn our thoughts into other channels and shield us from ourselves had failed him, it must come. Hunger is a powerful incentive to introspection.

It is a tragic hour, that hour when we are finally driven to reckon with ourselves, when every avenue of mental distraction has been cut off and

our own life and all its ineffaceable failures closes about us like the walls of that old torture chamber of the Inquisition. Tonight, as this man stood stranded in the streets of the city, his hour came. It was not the first time he had been hungry and desperate and alone. But always before there had been some outlook, some chance ahead, some pleasure yet untasted that seemed worth the effort, some face that he fancied was, or would be, dear. But it was not so tonight. The unyielding conviction was upon him that he had failed in everything, had outlived everything. It had been near him for a long time, that Pale Spectre. He had caught its shadow at the bottom of his glass many a time, at the head of his bed when he was sleepless at night, in the twilight shadows when some great sunset broke upon him. It had made life hateful to him when he awoke in the morning before now. But now it settled slowly over him, like night, the endless Northern nights that bid the sun a long farewell. It rose up before him like granite. From this brilliant city with its glad bustle of Yuletide he was shut off as completely as though he were a creature of another species. His days seemed numbered and done, sealed over like the little coral cells at the bottom of the sea. Involuntarily he drew that cold air through his lungs slowly, as though he were tasting it for the last time.

Yet he was but four and twenty, this man he looked even younger and he had a father some place down East who had been very proud of him once. Well, he had taken his life into his own hands, and this was what he had made of it. That was all there was to be said. He could remember the hopeful things they used to say about him at college in the old days, before he had cut away and begun to live by his wits, and he found courage to smile at them now. They had read him wrongly. He knew now that he never had the essentials of success, only the superficial agility that is often mistaken for it. He was tow without the tinder, and he had burnt himself out at other people's fires. He had helped other people to make it win, but he himself he had never touched an enterprise that had not failed eventually. Or, if it survived his connection with it, it left him behind.

His last venture had been with some ten-cent specialty company, a little lower than all the others, that had gone to pieces in Buffalo, and he had

worked his way to Chicago by boat. When the boat made up its crew for the outward voyage, he was dispensed with as usual. He was used to that. The reason for it? O, there are so many reasons for failure! His was a very common one.

As he stood there in the wet under the street light he drew up his reckoning with the world and decided that it had treated him as well as he deserved. He had overdrawn his account once too often. There had been a day when he thought otherwise; when he had said he was unjustly handled, that his failure was merely the lack of proper adjustment between himself and other men, that some day he would be recognized and it would all come right. But he knew better than that now, and he was still man enough to bear no grudge against any one man or woman.

Tonight was his birthday, too. There seemed something particularly amusing in that. He turned up a limp little coat collar to try to keep a little of the wet chill from his throat, and instinctively began to remember all the birthday parties he used to have. He was so cold and empty that his mind seemed unable to grapple with any serious question. He kept thinking about gingerbread and frosted cakes like a child. He could remember the splendid birthday parties his mother used to give him, when all the other little boys in the block came in their Sunday clothes and creaking shoes, with their ears still red from their mother's towel, and the pink and white birthday cake, and the stuffed olives and all the dishes of which he had been particularly fond, and how he would eat and eat and then go to bed and dream of Santa Claus. And in the morning he would awaken and eat again, until by night the family doctor arrived with his castor oil, and poor William used to dolefully say that it was altogether too much to have your birthday and Christmas all at once. He could remember, too, the royal birthday suppers he had given at college, and the stag dinners, and the toasts, and the music, and the good fellows who had wished him happiness and really meant what they said.

And since then there were other birthday suppers that he could not remember so clearly; the memory of them was heavy and flat, like cigarette smoke that has been shut in a room all night, like champagne that has been a day opened, a song that has been too often sung, an acute sensation that has been overstrained. They seemed tawdry and garish, discordant to him now. He rather wished he could forget them altogether.

Whichever way his mind now turned there was one thought that it could not escape, and that was the idea of food. He caught the scent of a cigar suddenly, and felt a sharp pain in the pit of his abdomen and a sudden moisture in his mouth. His cold hands clenched angrily, and for a moment he felt that bitter hatred of wealth, of ease, of everything that is well fed and well housed that is common to starving men. At any rate he had a right to eat! He had demanded great things from the world once: fame and wealth and admiration. Now it was simply bread and he would have it! He looked about him quickly and felt the blood begin to stir in his veins. In all his straits he had never stolen anything, his tastes were above it. But tonight there would be no tomorrow. He was amused at the way in which the idea excited him. Was it possible there was yet one more experience that would distract him, one thing that had power to excite his jaded interest? Good! he had failed at everything else, now he would see what his chances would be as a common thief. It would be amusing to watch the beautiful consistency of his destiny work itself out even in that role. It would be interesting to add another study to his gallery of futile attempts, and then label them all: "the failure as a journalist," "the failure as a lecturer," "the failure as a business man," "the failure as a thief," and so on, like the titles under the pictures of the Dance of Death. It was time that Childe Roland came to the dark tower.

A girl hastened by him with her arms full of packages. She walked quickly and nervously, keeping well within the shadow, as if she were not accustomed to carrying bundles and did not care to meet any of her friends. As she crossed the muddy street, she made an effort to lift her skirt a little, and as she did so one of the packages slipped unnoticed from



beneath her arm. He caught it up and overtook her. "Excuse me, but I think you dropped something."

She started, "O, yes, thank you, I would rather have lost anything than that."

The young man turned angrily upon himself. The package must have contained something of value. Why had he not kept it? Was this the sort of thief he would make? He ground his teeth together. There is nothing more maddening than to have morally consented to crime and then lack the nerve force to carry it out.

A carriage drove up to the house before which he stood. Several richly dressed women alighted and went in. It was a new house, and must have been built since he was in Chicago last. The front door was open and he could see down the hallway and up the staircase. The servant had left the door and gone with the guests. The first floor was brilliantly lighted, but the windows upstairs were dark. It looked very easy, just to slip upstairs to the darkened chambers where the jewels and trinkets of the fashionable occupants were kept.

Still burning with impatience against himself he entered quickly. Instinctively he removed his mud-stained hat as he passed quickly and quietly up the stair case. It struck him as being a rather superfluous courtesy in a burglar, but he had done it before he had thought. His way was clear enough, he met no one on the stairway or in the upper hall. The gas was lit in the upper hall. He passed the first chamber door through sheer cowardice. The second he entered quickly, thinking of something else lest his courage should fail him, and closed the door behind him. The light from the hall shone into the room through the transom. The apartment was furnished richly enough to justify his expectations. He went at once to the dressing case. A number of rings and small trinkets lay in a silver tray. These he put hastily in his pocket. He opened the upper drawer and found, as he expected, several leather cases. In the first he opened was a lady's watch, in the second a pair of old-fashioned bracelets;

he seemed to dimly remember having seen bracelets like them before, somewhere. The third case was heavier, the spring was much worn, and it opened easily. It held a cup of some kind. He held it up to the light and then his strained nerves gave way and he uttered a sharp exclamation. It was the silver mug he used to drink from when he was a little boy.

The door opened, and a woman stood in the doorway facing him. She was a tall woman, with white hair, in evening dress. The light from the hall streamed in upon him, but she was not afraid. She stood looking at him a moment, then she threw out her hand and went quickly toward him.

"Willie, Willie! Is it you?"

He struggled to loose her arms from him, to keep her lips from his cheek. "Mother you must not! You do not understand! O, my God, this is worst of all!" Hunger, weakness, cold, shame, all came back to him, and shook his self-control completely. Physically he was too weak to stand a shock like this. Why could it not have been an ordinary discovery, arrest, the station house and all the rest of it. Anything but this! A hard dry sob broke from him. Again he strove to disengage himself.

"Who is it says I shall not kiss my son? O, my boy, we have waited so long for this! You have been so long in coming, even I almost gave you up." Her lips upon his cheek burnt him like fire. He put his hand to his throat, and spoke thickly and incoherently: "You do not understand. I did not know you were here. I came here to rob it is the first time I swear it but I am a common thief. My pockets are full of your jewels now. Can't you hear me? I am a common thief!"

"Hush, my boy, those are ugly words. How could you rob your own house? How could you take what is your own? They are all yours, my son, as wholly yours as my great love and you can't doubt that, Will, do you?"

That soft voice, the warmth and fragrance of her person stole through his chill, empty veins like a gentle stimulant. He felt as though all his strength

were leaving him and even consciousness. He held fast to her and bowed his head on her strong shoulder, and groaned aloud.

"O, mother, life is hard, hard!"

She said nothing, but held him closer. And O, the strength of those white arms that held him! O, the assurance of safety in that warm bosom that rose and fell under his cheek! For a moment they stood so, silently. Then they heard a heavy step upon the stair. She led him to a chair and went out and closed the door. At the top of the staircase she met a tall, broad-shouldered man, with iron gray hair, and a face alert and stem. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks on fire, her whole face was one expression of intense determination.

"James, it is William in there, come home. You must keep him at any cost. If he goes this time, I go with him. O, James, be easy with him, he has suffered so." She broke from a command to an entreaty, and laid her hand on his shoulder. He looked questioningly at her a moment, then went in the room and quietly shut the door.

She stood leaning against the wall, clasping her temples with her hands and listening to the low indistinct sound of the voices within. Her own lips moved silently. She waited a long time, scarcely breathing. At last the door opened, and her husband came out. He stopped to say in a shaken voice, "You go to him now, he will stay. I will go to my room. I will see him again in the morning."

She put her arm about his neck, "O, James, I thank you, I thank you! This is the night he came so long ago, you remember? I gave him to you then, and now you give him back to me!"

"Don't, Helen," he muttered. "He is my son, I have never forgotten that. I failed with him. I don't like to fail, it cuts my pride. Take him and make a man of him." He passed on down the hall.

She flew into the room where the young man sat with his head bowed upon his knee. She dropped upon her knees beside him. Ah, it was so good to him to feel those arms again!

"He is so glad, Willie, so glad! He may not show it, but he is as happy as I. He never was demonstrative with either of us, you know."

"O, my God, he was good enough," groaned the man. "I told him everything, and he was good enough. I don't see how either of you can look at me, speak to me, touch me." He shivered under her clasp again as when she had first touched him, and tried weakly to throw her off.

But she whispered softly,  
"This is my right, my son."

Presently, when he was calmer, she rose. "Now, come with me into the library, and I will have your dinner brought there."

As they went downstairs she remarked apologetically, "I will not call Ellen tonight; she has a number of guests to attend to. She is a big girl now, you know, and came out last winter. Besides, I want you all to myself tonight." When the dinner came, and it came very soon, he fell upon it savagely. As he ate she told him all that had transpired during the years of his absence, and how his father's business had brought them there. "I was glad when we came. I thought you would drift West. I seemed a good deal nearer to you here."

There was a gentle unobtrusive sadness in her tone that was too soft for a reproach.

"Have you everything you want? It is a comfort to see you eat."

He smiled grimly, "It is certainly a comfort to me. I have not indulged in this frivolous habit for some thirty-five hours."

She caught his hand and pressed it sharply, uttering a quick remonstrance. "Don't say that! I know, but I can't hear you say it it's too terrible! My boy, food has choked me many a time when I have thought of the possibility of that. Now take the old lounging chair by the fire, and if you are too tired to talk, we will just sit and rest together."

He sank into the depths of the big leather chair with the lions' heads on the arms, where he had sat so often in the days when his feet did not touch the floor and he was half afraid of the grim monsters cut in the polished wood. That chair seemed to speak to him of things long forgotten. It was like the touch of an old familiar friend. He felt a sudden yearning tenderness for the happy little boy who had sat there and dreamed of the big world so long ago. Alas, he had been dead many a summer, that little boy!

He sat looking up at the magnificent woman beside him. He had almost forgotten how handsome she was; how lustrous and sad were the eyes that were set under that serene brow, how impetuous and wayward the mouth even now, how superb the white throat and shoulders! Ah, the wit and grace and fineness of this woman! He remembered how proud he had been of her as a boy when she came to see him at school. Then in the deep red coals of the grate he saw the faces of other women who had come since then into his vexed, disordered life. Laughing faces, with eyes artificially bright, eyes without depth or meaning, features without the stamp of high sensibilities. And he had left this face for such as those!

He sighed restlessly and laid his hand on hers. There seemed refuge and protection in the touch of her, as in the old days when he was afraid of the dark. He had been in the dark so long now, his confidence was so thoroughly shaken, and he was bitterly afraid of the night and of himself.

"Ah, mother, you make other things seem so false. You must feel that I owe you an explanation, but I can't make any, even to myself. Ah, but we make poor exchanges in life. I can't make out the riddle of it all. Yet there are things I ought to tell you before I accept your confidence like this."

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Will. Listen: Between you and me there can be no secrets. We are more alike than other people. Dear boy, I know all about it. I am a woman, and circumstances were different with me, but we are of one blood. I have lived all your life before you. You have never had an impulse that I have not known, you have never touched a brink that my feet have not trod. This is your birthday night. Twenty-four years ago I foresaw all this. I was a young woman then and I had hot battles of my own, and I felt your likeness to me. You were not like other babies. From the hour you were born you were restless and discontented, as I had been before you. You used to brace your strong little limbs against mine and try to throw me off as you did tonight. Tonight you have come back to me, just as you always did after you ran away to swim in the river that was forbidden you, the river you loved because it was forbidden. You are tired and sleepy, just as you used to be then, only a little older and a little paler and a little more foolish. I never asked you where you had been then, nor will I now. You have come back to me, that's all in all to me. I know your every possibility and limitation, as a composer knows his instrument."

He found no answer that was worthy to give to talk like this. He had not found life easy since he had lived by his wits. He had come to know poverty at close quarters. He had known what it was to be gay with an empty pocket, to wear violets in his buttonhole when he had not breakfasted, and all the hateful shams of the poverty of idleness. He had been a reporter on a big metropolitan daily, where men grind out their brains on paper until they have not one idea left and still grind on. He had worked in a real estate office, where ignorant men were swindled. He had sung in a comic opera chorus and played Harris in an Uncle Tom's Cabin company, and edited a socialist weekly. He had been dogged by debt and hunger and grinding poverty, until to sit here by a warm fire without concern as to how it would be paid for seemed unnatural.

He looked up at her questioningly. "I wonder if you know how much you pardon?"

"O, my poor boy, much or little, what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and paid such a bitter price for knowledge and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness, that it only loves, and loves and loves? They have not taught you well, the women of your world." She leaned over and kissed him, as no woman had kissed him since he left her.

He drew a long sigh of rich content. The old life, with all its bitterness and useless antagonism and flimsy sophistries, its brief delights that were always tinged with fear and distrust and unfaith, that whole miserable, futile, swindled world of Bohemia seemed immeasurably distant and far away, like a dream that is over and done. And as the chimes rang joyfully outside and sleep pressed heavily upon his eyelids, he wondered dimly if the Author of this sad little riddle of ours were not able to solve it after all, and if the Potter would not finally mete out his all comprehensive justice, such as none but he could have, to his Things of Clay, which are made in his own patterns, weak or strong, for his own ends; and if some day we will not awaken and find that all evil is a dream, a mental distortion that will pass when the dawn shall break.

# Getting It Right

Maeve Binchy

Irene had loved Jim for seventeen months before he said that he loved her.

“You do?” she said in delight.

“That’s not much of an answer” Jim grumbled. “You’re meant to say you love me too.”

“Of course I do” she hugged him.

“Well then?” he said.

“Well what?” she was confused.

“Will we get married?” he asked, as if it was obvious.

Her eyes filled with tears. He was so straightforward and honest. If you loved someone that was it – you got married. No trials, no rehearsals, no seeing how things went. The whole works.

“I’d love to” she said simply. “I think we’ll be very happy.”

And she was sure that they would. They laughed at the same things, they believed the same sort of beliefs, they liked the same kind of people. They weren’t smart and glib and cynical. They thought that a lot of politicians were honest, a lot of churchmen were doing a good job. They didn’t cheat on their income tax and boast about it. They didn’t steal from the office or try to get away without paying a fare on a train.

Irene’s parents lived in Dublin so Jim had met them often. On nights they had no money to go out they often sat at home and looked at television



with her parents. He supported a different team and so had endless conversations about this with her father. Jim liked cooking and would debate with her mother ways of making bread. He said you could do great things with yeast. Irene's mother said life wasn't long enough to introduce yeast into cooking. In many ways Jim was part of her family already. But the thing was that Irene had never met Jim's family. Not in the whole two years they had been going out. The subject had never come up. But now that they were going to get married of course it would. Naturally their son couldn't go home and say he was marrying this girl from Dublin and not introduce her. They'd surely think it strange that things had gone this far and they had not met her already.

Irene began to be uneasy about it. Jim was very relaxed.

"You'll come down and stay a weekend" he said.

"When?"

"Whenever suits you and them I suppose. I'm easy."

And he was easy, sure, confident, relaxed that it was all going to be fine.

"Will we go next weekend?" Irene wanted to be over it.

"No, I think they're away somewhere."

He was vague. Imagine having parents who might be away "somewhere." Irene's parents went abroad every two years. It was saved for, planned for, discussed. Everyone knew. She tried to think herself into a world where parents MIGHT be away.

It was a leap too great to make.

"Well tell me when" she said trying to hide her unease.

“Sure.”

Jim went home about four times a year. He didn't phone much or write as far as she could see. But that was boys for you. He had a brother in America and a brother in England. Did they stay in touch with home? Jim wasn't sure...they probably did. They kept in great touch with him and came back for matches and to sleep on the floor of his flat in Dublin. They were nice fellows, much like Jim. They seemed pleased that he was getting married.

“Do you think we'll be able to corral the parents in for the wedding” said Kevin the eldest, home on a visit.

A dart of fear came into Irene's heart. Did this mean that Jim's parents might not approve. They might think her too lowly for their son. She had written them a nice note saying that she was very happy to be marrying their son. There had been no reply.

“Aw, don't worry about that,” Jim reassured her. “They mightn't have been there. They're not letter writers.”

It seemed pretty thin to Irene. All they had to write was a card, saying they were pleased too. Or ring. She had given her phone number. He was their first child to marry. They must disapprove of her greatly. And then of course Irene became very proud and even blustering.

What reason had she to feel defensive. They hadn't even met her. How could they disapprove at long distance? When she did get to see them she would knock their eyes out. They would realise that their Jim was very lucky to have been accepted by Irene. That's the way she was going to look at it. But nearer the time when the date was fixed, her courage lessened. She had tried without any success to get a picture of their lifestyle. Jim had very few photographs of himself as a child.

“They're all at home in an album, you'll see them when you come to stay.”

But she wanted to see them BEFORE. She wanted to forewarn herself, to have some inkling about the home she was going into. In terms of describing his own lifestyle he was worse than useless.

“I’m doing my best love,” he would say. “But how do I answer a question like that? There’s no answer to it.”

The question had been, “What is your sitting room like at home?”

It was a question that Irene would have thought a slow learner in mixed infants could have answered. She had looked so cast down that he made a huge effort.

“Its got chairs and things,” he said eventually.

Jim had been at boarding school, which made him a higher class than Irene. Or so she said. Jim didn’t understand this.

“I keep telling you it was only because they were always so busy at home that they sent us to that place,” he said over and over.

“And my grandfather paid.”

But it was a very posh thing to be busy. Irene thought of her parents... the only thing that made them busy was her father going out to work on shifts to pay for the house and the food for them all, and her mother cleaning the house, and queuing in the cheaper places to buy the food.

“Did your parents have lots of friends when you were young?” she asked Jim.

Apparently they had. Lots. Different people from here and there. Irene’s parents had only four friends. They went out together all six of them on a Saturday night. They lived in the same road. She couldn’t imagine anyone having different friends from here and there and being too busy to cook

for your children so you had to send them to boarding school. These must be seriously frightening people. Yet Jim talked of them with vague affection and warmth, and when pinned down said they were very good and very kind and he was sure Irene would love them and that they would love her. Irene wasn't at all sure. But she was going to give it her best shot.

She borrowed a suitcase, a small leather one from Kitty at work, and a jacket from Jenny and a simple gold chain that Jim's parents would KNOW was real gold. She borrowed her mother's watch because it didn't have a funny face on it like her own did. She read a book on wine appreciation and one on recognising antiques. By the day of the visit she was as ready for them as she ever would be. She had thought they would travel together, she and Jim on the train to the country and that his parents would drive to meet them. She had asked what kind of car but it had been different cars, this kind and that kind. There was always a bus Jim had said, if they weren't there. But why wouldn't they be there? Oh you know, so many things to do. Here and there. But as it happened on the very day they were to leave Jim got a job that meant he wouldn't be able to come on the train with her. It was such a good chance he would be foolish to pass it up. It might make a difference to his whole future in the firm.

"I'll wait with you and come on the later train" Irene said. But Jim didn't think that was a good idea.

"They think we're coming on the seven o'clock train" he said.

"They might be there. Better not to upset them."

He gave her instructions about the bus if they didn't turn up. Since it was almost certain that they wouldn't be there Irene couldn't see why she had to go alone. But she didn't want to fuss Jim further so she went. Of course they weren't at the station, but she found the bus and the house. It was quite small and shabby looking. She noted with relief a tangled garden, a creeper practically growing in through the windows. But this could be Old Money. She knocked nervously and nobody answered. So she went around

to the back door where she thought she had seen some signs of life. And there she found them – a tall middle aged couple. The look on their faces was one of alarm rather than welcome.

“I’m delighted to meet you,” she said stretching out her hand.

“I’m Irene.”

“Yes... well, em,” the man said taking her hand.

The woman wore rubber gloves and had been cleaning the floor.

“Well... indeed... I’m sure,” she said.

It wasn’t a great reception. But at least they hadn’t thrown her out, said she was too common for their son. That said she would have to fight them every inch of the way. Irene wondered had she seen too many old movies, read too many novels. But they hadn’t asked her to sit down, or offered to show her her room, or give her a glass of sherry.

“So here we are,” Irene beamed at them. Her mother had what was called an infectious laugh. People would start to laugh when she did. Irene thought it might not be wise to laugh in this kitchen. Not yet. But perhaps she might have inherited an infectious smile. It turned out not to be the case.

“Why don’t we leave all this and go in and have a little drink?” she said.

Somebody had to do the hostess bit, otherwise the show wouldn’t go on.

They looked at her startled.

“That’s what Jim would like, I think” she said firmly trying to keep down the nervous beating of her heart.

Nothing he had told her could have warned her of two such extraordinary people. It wasn't even as if they were hostile. For them she didn't exist. The unlikely threesome moved into the front room. There were pictures on a piano. Family groups. It was hard to pinpoint Jim. There were girls also, possibly cousins. Irene didn't want to ask that they should all be identified yet. Jim's mother had at last removed her rubber gloves, which was an advance, and his father was moving towards a drinks trolley.

"Mead?" he suggested.

Irene knew when something looked like the only game in town.

"Mead would be lovely," she said.

She told them about her train journey down. It was tough going.

"Where did you come from?" Jim's father asked eventually.

"Dublin," Irene said.

"Oh," they both nodded sagely and looked at each other as if this might explain something.

"But surely you knew...?"

They shook their heads.

"We're told very little," Jim's mother said.

"Less and less," his father added.

Irene felt defensive about Jim. They were implying that he was keeping them in the dark.

“But you’re so busy,” she said, “so tied up in things – that’s why you don’t hear every little detail.”

“I wouldn’t say we were THAT busy,” her future father-in-law said. He had a long narrow face, so unlike the chubby smiling features of his son that Irene fought to see the likeness.

“Not since you retired certainly,” said his wife. Her face too was thin and angular. Yet all the sons had been quite plump. Irene wondered would her children be a throwback to this particular cast of face. How extraordinary it all was.

“I meant socially, with your social life,” she said.

“I can’t think when we’ve been invited anywhere,” he said.

“Or invited anyone in,” added the woman.

Irene wondered whether she was imagining it or was the woman looking at her rather pointedly.

“I don’t want to interrupt anything you may have planned, I hope you’ll just carry on as normal,” Irene said.

“Yes...well that was what we were thinking,” the man said.

“And what had you in mind to do?” Irene wondered how many more hours she could keep this up until Jim arrived.

He had said it might be nice for her to get to know his parents on her own, to share their interests.

“Well, we never do anything much,” his mother said.

“We prefer to let the world pass us by,” said his father. “That will be nice, I’m sure we’ll all like that,” Irene said biting her lip in desperation.

“Is that what you’re going to do too?” the man asked politely.

“Well of course if it’s what you do. We’d love to do that. Fit in.”

“There are more of you?” the woman looked around in alarm.

“Well, no. Only us. Jim and me.”

Her grammar had gone haywire. Jim’s parents were deranged. Why hadn’t he told her?

“Jim?” they both said in confusion.

“Your son,” Irene said holding tight to the arms of the chair.

“Our son isn’t called Jim,” the man said his eyes narrowing darkly.

“Well James...then I suppose.” She should have known they were people who wouldn’t use diminutive forms of address.

“Ah, James,” they relaxed a bit.

“How do you know James?” the woman asked.

“I’m going to marry James,” Irene said.

And at the look of shock and horror in their faces she finally broke. She stood up from her chair.

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing. You KNOW we’re getting married. He told you, I told you, his brothers told you. If you think you’re making me feel foolish by all this carry on. You’re quite wrong. I don’t care



if you think I'm nothing. I am a real person and a good person and I'm going to make Jim very, very happy. So there!"

Jim's mother appeared to have fainted. His father was reviving her, unwisely possibly with more mead. Irene sat sobbing waiting for them to say something. Eventually Jim's father asked.

"How long has this ... relationship been going on?"

"For two years. I wrote it all to you."

And has James asked to be freed from his vows, laicised?"

"What vows?"

"James, as you very well know, has been a priest on the missions in Africa for the past twenty years," said the man.

And soon the mead was being used to revive Irene. It got sorted out. There were two houses near the bus stop, one of them belonged to Jim's family, and one belonged to this couple. Irene had chosen the wrong one. This couple had five daughters, nuns in convents and one son, a missionary priest. All of them had sent letters recently saying that it was time the parents had help in the home. They had been trying to tidy up their home so that the help, when it was eventually summoned, would not find the place too terrible. They thought Irene was the lady from the agency.

By the time Jim's train arrived they had finished the mead and they knew all about each other. It had been great having so many vocations in the family but sad because the way things were, it had meant no grandchildren. In a way the man said, he had been half excited when Irene said she was going to marry Father James. It might have meant a baby on the way.

“Maybe some of the girls will come out, loads of them do,” Irene was quite recovered now. And feeling all the better because she had heard about her real parents in law. Terrifying ageing hippies apparently. Went round the place in a trailer. Their house was in even worse state than this one. They had been to Graceland in America and Nashville and they wore beads and long hair and grew strange things in the garden that weren’t weeds but weren’t dug up either. The sons had all turned out great fellows and were very tolerant to the half daft parents.

“Maybe I’d better go over there,” Irene said.

“Yes, but make yourself look a bit less like the perfect weekend guest,” they suggested.

They gave her a flower for her ear and told her to exchange her posh patent leather shoes for sandals. When Jim arrived, Irene was sitting on the floor with his parents looking through pictures of their last trip to Stonehenge.

“Don’t you think she’s wonderful?” he asked putting his arm protectively around Irene in case their praise wasn’t high enough.

“And more than that, she’s made friends with the boring old Barrys across the road,” said his father.

“The people who looked down their noses on us for years.”

“The ones that were too religious for their own good.”

“They’ve asked us all in for mead tomorrow at lunchtime.” Jim looked at Irene with adoration.

“I told you it would be no trouble,” he said.

“And you were right,” said Irene, who had an unerring sense of knowing when there was more to be said and when there was nothing more to be said.

# The Aged Mother

Matsuo Basho

Long, long ago there lived at the foot of the mountain a poor farmer and his aged, widowed mother. They owned a bit of land which supplied them with food, and they were humble, peaceful, and happy.

Shining was governed by a despotic leader who though a warrior, had a great and cowardly shrinking from anything suggestive of failing health and strength. This caused him to send out a cruel proclamation. The entire province was given strict orders to immediately put to death all aged people. Those were barbarous days, and the custom of abandoning old people to die was not uncommon. The poor farmer loved his aged mother with tender reverence, and the order filled his heart with sorrow. But no one ever thought twice about obeying the mandate of the governor, so with many deep and hopeless sighs, the youth prepared for what at that time was considered the kindest mode of death.

Just at sundown, when his day's work was ended, he took a quantity of unwhitened rice which was the principal food for the poor, and he cooked, dried it, and tied it in a square cloth, which he swung in a bundle around his neck along with a gourd filled with cool, sweet water. Then he lifted his helpless old mother to his back and started on his painful journey up the mountain. The road was long and steep; the narrow road was crossed and re-crossed by many paths made by the hunters and woodcutters. In some place, they lost and confused, but he gave no heed. One path or another, it mattered not. On he went, climbing blindly upward -- ever upward towards the high bare summit of what is known as Obatsuyama, the mountain of the "abandoning of the aged."

The eyes of the old mother were not so dim but that they noted the reckless hastening from one path to another, and her loving heart grew anxious. Her son did not know the mountain's many paths and his return

might be one of danger, so she stretched forth her hand and snapping the twigs from brushes as they passed, she quietly dropped a handful every few steps of the way so that as they climbed, the narrow path behind them was dotted at frequent intervals with tiny piles of twigs. At last the summit was reached. Weary and heart sick, the youth gently released his burden and silently prepared a place of comfort as his last duty to the loved one. Gathering fallen pine needles, he made a soft cushion and tenderly lifted his old mother onto it. He wrapped her padded coat more closely about the stooping shoulders and with tearful eyes and an aching heart he said farewell.

The trembling mother's voice was full of unselfish love as she gave her last injunction. "Let not thine eyes be blinded, my son." She said. "The mountain road is full of dangers. LOOK carefully and follow the path which holds the piles of twigs. They will guide you to the familiar path farther down." The son's surprised eyes looked back over the path, then at the poor old, shriveled hands all scratched and soiled by their work of love. His heart broke within and bowing to the ground, he cried aloud: "oh, Honorable mother, your kindness breaks my heart! I will not leave you. Together we will follow the path of twigs, and together we will die!"

Once more he shouldered his burden (how light it seemed now) and hastened down the path, through the shadows and the moonlight, to the little hut in the valley. Beneath the kitchen floor was a walled closet for food, which was covered and hidden from view. There the son hid his mother, supplying her with everything she needed, continually watching and fearing she would be discovered. Time passed, and he was beginning to feel safe when again the governor sent forth heralds bearing an unreasonable order, seemingly as a boast of his power. His demand was that his subjects should present him with a rope of ashes.

The entire province trembled with dread. The order must be obeyed yet who in all Shining could make a rope of ashes? One night, in great distress, the son whispered the news to his hidden mother. "Wait!" she said. "I will think. I will think." On the second day she told him what to do. "Make rope

of twisted straw,” she said. “Then stretch it upon a row of flat stones and burn it on a windless night.” He called the people together and did as she said and when the blaze died down, there upon the stones, with every twist and fiber showing perfectly, lay a rope of ashes.

The governor was pleased at the wit of the youth and praised greatly, but he demanded to know where he had obtained his wisdom. “Alas! Alas!” cried the farmer, “the truth must be told!” and with deep bows he related his story. The governor listened and then meditated in silence. Finally he lifted his head. “Shining needs more than strength of youth,” he said gravely. “Ah, that I should have forgotten the well-known saying, “with the crown of snow, there cometh wisdom!” That very hour the cruel law was abolished, and custom drifted into as far a past that only legends remain.

# The Man With Two Left Feet

P.G. Wodehouse

Students of the folk-lore of the United States of America are no doubt familiar with the quaint old story of Clarence MacFadden. Clarence MacFadden, it seems, was 'wishful to dance, but his feet wasn't gaited that way. So he sought a professor and asked him his price, and said he was willing to pay. The professor' (the legend goes on) 'looked down with alarm at his feet and marked their enormous expanse; and he tacked on a five to his regular price for teaching MacFadden to dance.'

I have often been struck by the close similarity between the case of Clarence and that of Henry Wallace Mills. One difference alone presents itself. It would seem to have been mere vanity and ambition that stimulated the former; whereas the motive force which drove Henry Mills to defy Nature and attempt dancing was the purer one of love. He did it to please his wife. Had he never gone to Ye Bonnie Briar-Bush Farm, that popular holiday resort, and there met Minnie Hill, he would doubtless have continued to spend in peaceful reading the hours not given over to work at the New York bank at which he was employed as paying-cashier. For Henry was a voracious reader. His idea of a pleasant evening was to get back to his little flat, take off his coat, put on his slippers, light a pipe, and go on from the point where he had left off the night before in his perusal of the BIS-CAL volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—making notes as he read in a stout notebook. He read the BIS-CAL volume because, after many days, he had finished the A-AND, AND-AUS, and the AUS-BIS. There was something admirable—and yet a little horrible—about Henry's method of study. He went after Learning with the cold and dispassionate relentlessness of a stoat pursuing a rabbit. The ordinary man who is paying instalments on the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is apt to get over-excited and to skip impatiently to Volume XXVIII (VET-ZYM) to see how it all comes out in the end. Not so Henry. His was not a frivolous mind. He intended to read the *Encyclopaedia* through, and he was not going to spoil his pleasure by peeping ahead.

It would seem to be an inexorable law of Nature that no man shall shine at both ends. If he has a high forehead and a thirst for wisdom, his

fox-trotting (if any) shall be as the staggerings of the drunken; while, if he is a good dancer, he is nearly always petrified from the ears upward. No better examples of this law could have been found than Henry Mills and his fellow-cashier, Sidney Mercer. In New York banks paying-cashiers, like bears, tigers, lions, and other fauna, are always shut up in a cage in pairs, and are consequently dependent on each other for entertainment and social intercourse when business is slack. Henry Mills and Sidney simply could not find a subject in common. Sidney knew absolutely nothing of even such elementary things as Abana, Aberration, Abraham, or Acrogenae; while Henry, on his side, was scarcely aware that there had been any developments in the dance since the polka. It was a relief to Henry when Sidney threw up his job to join the chorus of a musical comedy, and was succeeded by a man who, though full of limitations, could at least converse intelligently on Bowls.

Such, then, was Henry Wallace Mills. He was in the middle thirties, temperate, studious, a moderate smoker, and—one would have said—a bachelor of the bachelors, armour-plated against Cupid's well-meant but obsolete artillery. Sometimes Sidney Mercer's successor in the teller's cage, a sentimental young man, would broach the topic of Woman and Marriage. He would ask Henry if he ever intended to get married. On such occasions Henry would look at him in a manner which was a blend of scorn, amusement, and indignation; and would reply with a single word:

'Me!'

It was the way he said it that impressed you.

But Henry had yet to experience the unmaning atmosphere of a lonely summer resort. He had only just reached the position in the bank where he was permitted to take his annual vacation in the summer. Hitherto he had always been released from his cage during the winter months, and had spent his ten days of freedom at his flat, with a book in his hand and his feet on the radiator. But the summer after Sidney Mercer's departure they unleashed him in August.

It was meltingly warm in the city. Something in Henry cried out for the country. For a month before the beginning of his vacation he devoted much of the time that should have been given to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in reading summer-resort literature. He decided at length upon Ye Bonnie Briar-Bush Farm because the advertisements spoke so well of it.



Ye Bonnie Briar-Bush Farm was a rather battered frame building many miles from anywhere. Its attractions included a Lovers' Leap, a Grotto, golf-links—a five-hole course where the enthusiast found unusual hazards in the shape of a number of goats tethered at intervals between the holes—and a silvery lake, only portions of which were used as a dumping-ground for tin cans and wooden boxes. It was all new and strange to Henry and caused him an odd exhilaration. Something of gaiety and reckless abandon began to creep into his veins. He had a curious feeling that in these romantic surroundings some adventure ought to happen to him.

At this juncture Minnie Hill arrived. She was a small, slim girl, thinner and paler than she should have been, with large eyes that seemed to Henry pathetic and stirred his chivalry. He began to think a good deal about Minnie Hill.

And then one evening he met her on the shores of the silvery lake. He was standing there, slapping at things that looked like mosquitoes, but could not have been, for the advertisements expressly stated that none were ever found in the neighbourhood of Ye Bonnie Briar-Bush Farm, when along she came. She walked slowly, as if she were tired. A strange thrill, half of pity, half of something else, ran through Henry. He looked at her. She looked at him.

'Good evening,' he said.

They were the first words he had spoken to her. She never contributed to the dialogue of the dining-room, and he had been too shy to seek her out in the open.

She said 'Good evening,' too, tying the score. And there was silence for a moment.

Commiseration overcame Henry's shyness.

'You're looking tired,' he said.

'I feel tired.' She paused. 'I overdid it in the city.'

'It?'

'Dancing.'

'Oh, dancing. Did you dance much?'

'Yes; a great deal.'

'Ah!'

A promising, even a dashing start. But how to continue? For the first time Henry regretted the steady determination of his methods with the *Encyclopaedia*. How pleasant if he could have been in a position to talk easily of Dancing. Then memory reminded him that, though he had not yet got up to Dancing, it was only a few weeks before that he had been reading of the Ballet.

'I don't dance myself,' he said, 'but I am fond of reading about it. Did you know that the word "ballet" incorporated three distinct modern words, "ballet", "ball", and "ballad", and that ballet-dancing was originally accompanied by singing?'

It hit her. It had her weak. She looked at him with awe in her eyes. One might almost say that she gaped at Henry.

'I hardly know anything,' she said.

'The first descriptive ballet seen in London, England,' said Henry, quietly, 'was "The Tavern Bilkers", which was played at Drury Lane in—in seventeen—something.'

'Was it?'

'And the earliest modern ballet on record was that given by—by someone to celebrate the marriage of the Duke of Milan in 1489.'

There was no doubt or hesitation about the date this time. It was grappled to his memory by hoops of steel owing to the singular coincidence of it being also his telephone number. He gave it out with a roll, and the girl's eyes widened.

'What an awful lot you know!'

'Oh, no,' said Henry, modestly. 'I read a great deal.'

'It must be splendid to know a lot,' she said, wistfully. 'I've never had time for reading. I've always wanted to. I think you're wonderful!'

Henry's soul was expanding like a flower and purring like a well-tickled cat. Never in his life had he been admired by a woman. The sensation was intoxicating.

Silence fell upon them. They started to walk back to the farm, warned by the distant ringing of a bell that supper was about to materialize. It was not a musical bell, but distance and the magic of this unusual moment lent it charm. The sun was setting. It threw a crimson carpet across the silvery lake. The air was very still. The creatures, unclassified by science, who might have been mistaken for mosquitoes had their presence been possible at Ye Bonnie Briar-Bush Farm, were biting harder than ever. But Henry heeded them not. He did not even slap at them. They drank their fill of his blood and went away to put their friends on to this good thing; but for Henry they did not exist. Strange things were happening to him. And, lying awake that night in bed, he recognized the truth. He was in love.

After that, for the remainder of his stay, they were always together. They walked in the woods, they sat by the silvery lake. He poured out the treasures of his learning for her, and she looked at him with reverent eyes, uttering from time to time a soft 'Yes' or a musical 'Gee!'

In due season Henry went back to New York.

'You're dead wrong about love, Mills,' said his sentimental fellow-cashier, shortly after his return. 'You ought to get married.'

'I'm going to,' replied Henry, briskly. 'Week tomorrow.'

Which stunned the other so thoroughly that he gave a customer who entered at that moment fifteen dollars for a ten-dollar cheque, and had to do some excited telephoning after the bank had closed.

Henry's first year as a married man was the happiest of his life. He had always heard this period described as the most perilous of matrimony. He had braced himself for clashings of tastes, painful adjustments of character, sudden and unavoidable quarrels. Nothing of the kind happened. From the very beginning they settled down in perfect harmony. She merged with his life as smoothly as one river joins another. He did not even have to alter his habits. Every morning he had his breakfast at eight, smoked a cigarette, and walked to the Underground. At five he left the bank, and at six he arrived home, for it was his practice to walk the first two miles of the way, breathing deeply and regularly. Then dinner. Then the quiet evening. Sometimes the moving-pictures, but generally the quiet evening, he reading the *Encyclopaedia*—aloud now—Minnie darning his socks, but never ceasing to listen.

Each day brought the same sense of grateful amazement that he should be so wonderfully happy, so extraordinarily peaceful. Everything was as perfect as it could be. Minnie was looking a different girl. She had lost her drawn look. She was filling out.

Sometimes he would suspend his reading for a moment, and look across at her. At first he would see only her soft hair, as she bent over her sewing. Then, wondering at the silence, she would look up, and he would meet her big eyes. And then Henry would gurgle with happiness, and demand of himself, silently:

'Can you beat it!'

It was the anniversary of their wedding. They celebrated it in fitting style. They dined at a crowded and exhilarating Italian restaurant on a street off Seventh Avenue, where red wine was included in the bill, and excitable people, probably extremely clever, sat round at small tables and talked all together at the top of their voices. After dinner they saw a musical comedy. And then—the great event of the night—they went on to supper at a glittering restaurant near Times Square.

There was something about supper at an expensive restaurant which had always appealed to Henry's imagination. Earnest devourer as he was of the solids of literature, he had tasted from time to time its lighter face—those novels which begin with the hero supping in the midst of the glittering throng and having his attention attracted to a distinguished-looking elderly man with a grey imperial who is entering with a girl so strikingly beautiful that the revellers turn, as she passes, to look after her. And then, as he sits and smokes, a waiter comes up to the hero and, with a soft '*Pardon, m'sieu!*' hands him a note.

The atmosphere of Geisenheimer's suggested all that sort of thing to Henry. They had finished supper, and he was smoking a cigar—his second that day. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed the scene. He felt braced up, adventurous. He had that feeling, which comes to all quiet men who like to sit at home and read, that this was the sort of atmosphere in which he really belonged. The brightness of it all—the dazzling lights, the music, the hubbub, in which the deep-throated gurgle of the wine-agent surprised while drinking soup blended with the shriller note of the chorus-girl calling to her mate—these things got Henry. He was thirty-six next birthday, but he felt a youngish twenty-one.

A voice spoke at his side. Henry looked up, to perceive Sidney Mercer.

The passage of a year, which had turned Henry into a married man, had turned Sidney Mercer into something so magnificent that the spectacle for a moment deprived Henry of speech. Faultless evening dress clung with loving closeness to Sidney's lissom form. Gleaming shoes of perfect patent leather covered his feet. His light hair was brushed back into a smooth sleekness on which the electric lights shone like stars on some beautiful pool. His practically chinless face beamed amiably over a spotless collar.

Henry wore blue serge.

'What are you doing here, Henry, old top?' said the vision. 'I didn't know you ever came among the bright lights.'

His eyes wandered off to Minnie. There was admiration in them, for Minnie was looking her prettiest.

'Wife,' said Henry, recovering speech. And to Minnie: 'Mr Mercer. Old friend.'

'So you're married? Wish you luck. How's the bank?'

Henry said the bank was doing as well as could be expected.

'You still on the stage?'

Mr Mercer shook his head importantly.

'Got better job. Professional dancer at this show. Rolling in money. Why aren't you dancing?'

The words struck a jarring note. The lights and the music until that moment had had a subtle psychological effect on Henry, enabling him to hypnotize himself into a feeling that it was not inability to dance that kept him in his seat, but that he had had so much of that sort of thing that he really preferred to sit quietly and look on for a change. Sidney's question changed all that. It made him face the truth.

'I don't dance.'

'For the love of Mike! I bet Mrs Mills does. Would you care for a turn, Mrs Mills?'

'No, thank you, really.'

But remorse was now at work on Henry. He perceived that he had been standing in the way of Minnie's pleasure. Of course she wanted to dance. All women did. She was only refusing for his sake.

'Nonsense, Min. Go to it!'

Minnie looked doubtful.

'Of course you must dance, Min. I shall be all right. I'll sit here and smoke!'

The next moment Minnie and Sidney were treading the complicated measure; and simultaneously Henry ceased to be a youngish twenty-one and was even conscious of a fleeting doubt as to whether he was really only thirty-five.

Boil the whole question of old age down, and what it amounts to is that a man is young as long as he can dance without getting lumbago, and, if he cannot dance, he is never young at all. This was the truth that forced itself upon Henry Wallace Mills, as he sat watching his wife moving over the floor in the arms of Sidney Mercer. Even he could see that Minnie danced well. He thrilled at the sight of her gracefulness; and for the first time since his marriage he became introspective. It had never struck him before how much younger Minnie was than himself. When she had signed the paper at the City Hall on the occasion of the purchase of the marriage licence, she had given her age, he remembered now, as twenty-six. It had made no impression on him at the time. Now, however, he perceived clearly that between twenty-six and thirty-five there was a gap of nine years; and a chill sensation came upon him of being old and stodgy. How dull it must be for poor little Minnie to be cooped up night after night with such an old foggy? Other men took their wives out and gave them a good time, dancing half the night with them. All he could do was to sit at home and read Minnie dull stuff from the *Encyclopaedia*. What a life for the poor child! Suddenly, he felt acutely jealous of the rubber-jointed Sidney Mercer, a man whom hitherto he had always heartily despised.

The music stopped. They came back to the table, Minnie with a pink glow on her face that made her younger than ever; Sidney, the insufferable ass, grinning and smirking and pretending to be eighteen. They looked like a couple of children—Henry, catching sight of himself in a mirror, was surprised to find that his hair was not white.

Half an hour later, in the cab going home, Minnie, half asleep, was aroused by a sudden stiffening of the arm that encircled her waist and a sudden snort close to her ear.

It was Henry Wallace Mills resolving that he would learn to dance.

Being of a literary turn of mind and also economical, Henry's first step towards his new ambition was to buy a fifty-cent book entitled *The ABC of Modern Dancing*, by 'Tango'. It would, he felt—not without reason—be simpler and less expensive if he should learn the steps by the aid of this treatise than by the more customary method of taking lessons. But quite early in the proceedings he was faced by complications. In the first place, it was his intention to keep what he was doing a secret from Minnie, in order to be able to give her a pleasant surprise on her birthday, which would be coming round in a few weeks. In the second place, *The ABC of Modern Dancing* proved on investigation far more complex than its title suggested.

These two facts were the ruin of the literary method, for, while it was possible to study the text and the plates at the bank, the home was the only place in which he could attempt to put the instructions into practice. You cannot move the right foot along dotted line A B and bring the left foot round curve C D in a paying-cashier's cage in a bank, nor, if you are at all sensitive to public opinion, on the pavement going home. And while he was trying to do it in the parlour of the flat one night when he imagined that Minnie was in the kitchen cooking supper, she came in unexpectedly to ask how he wanted the steak cooked. He explained that he had had a sudden touch of cramp, but the incident shook his nerve.

After this he decided that he must have lessons.

Complications did not cease with this resolve. Indeed, they became more acute. It was not that there was any difficulty about finding an instructor. The papers were full of their advertisements. He selected a Mme Gavarni because she lived in a convenient spot. Her house was in a side street, with a station within easy reach. The real problem was when to find time for the lessons. His life was run on such a regular schedule that he could hardly alter so important a moment in it as the hour of his arrival home without exciting comment. Only deceit could provide a solution.

'Min, dear,' he said at breakfast.

'Yes, Henry?'

Henry turned mauve. He had never lied to her before.

'I'm not getting enough exercise.'

'Why you look so well.'

'I get a kind of heavy feeling sometimes. I think I'll put on another mile or so to my walk on my way home. So—so I'll be back a little later in future.'

'Very well, dear.'

It made him feel like a particularly low type of criminal, but, by abandoning his walk, he was now in a position to devote an hour a day to the lessons; and Mme Gavarni had said that that would be ample.

'Sure, Bill,' she had said. She was a breezy old lady with a military moustache and an unconventional manner with her clientele. 'You come to me an hour a day, and, if you haven't two left feet, we'll make you the pet of society in a month.'

'Is that so?'

'It sure is. I never had a failure yet with a pupe, except one. And that wasn't my fault.'

'Had he two left feet?'

'Hadn't any feet at all. Fell off of a roof after the second lesson, and had to have 'em cut off him. At that, I could have learned him to tango with wooden legs, only he got kind of discouraged. Well, see you Monday, Bill. Be good.'

And the kindly old soul, retrieving her chewing gum from the panel of the door where she had placed it to facilitate conversation, dismissed him.

And now began what, in later years, Henry unhesitatingly considered the most miserable period of his existence. There may be times when a man who is past his first youth feels more unhappy and ridiculous than when he is taking a course of lessons in the modern dance, but it is not easy to think of them. Physically, his new experience caused Henry acute pain. Muscles whose existence he had never suspected came into being for—apparently—the sole purpose of aching. Mentally he suffered even more.

This was partly due to the peculiar method of instruction in vogue at Mme Gavarni's, and partly to the fact that, when it came to the actual



lessons, a sudden niece was produced from a back room to give them. She was a blonde young lady with laughing blue eyes, and Henry never clasped her trim waist without feeling a black-hearted traitor to his absent Minnie. Conscience racked him. Add to this the sensation of being a strange, jointless creature with abnormally large hands and feet, and the fact that it was Mme Gavarni's custom to stand in a corner of the room during the hour of tuition, chewing gum and making comments, and it is not surprising that Henry became wan and thin.

Mme Gavarni had the trying habit of endeavouring to stimulate Henry by frequently comparing his performance and progress with that of a cripple whom she claimed to have taught at some previous time.

She and the niece would have spirited arguments in his presence as to whether or not the cripple had one-stepped better after his third lesson than Henry after his fifth. The niece said no. As well, perhaps, but not better. Mme Gavarni said that the niece was forgetting the way the cripple had slid his feet. The niece said yes, that was so, maybe she was. Henry said nothing. He merely perspired.

He made progress slowly. This could not be blamed upon his instructress, however. She did all that one woman could to speed him up. Sometimes she would even pursue him into the street in order to show him on the side-walk a means of doing away with some of his numerous errors of *technique*, the elimination of which would help to make him definitely the cripple's superior. The misery of embracing her indoors was as nothing to the misery of embracing her on the sidewalk.

Nevertheless, having paid for his course of lessons in advance, and being a determined man, he did make progress. One day, to his surprise, he found his feet going through the motions without any definite exercise of will-power on his part—almost as if they were endowed with an intelligence of their own. It was the turning-point. It filled him with a singular pride such as he had not felt since his first rise of salary at the bank.

Mme Gavarni was moved to dignified praise.

'Some speed, kid!' she observed. 'Some speed!'

Henry blushed modestly. It was the accolade.

Every day, as his skill at the dance became more manifest, Henry found occasion to bless the moment when he had decided to take lessons. He shuddered sometimes at the narrowness of his escape from disaster. Every day now it became more apparent to him, as he watched Minnie, that she was chafing at the monotony of her life. That fatal supper had wrecked the peace of their little home. Or perhaps it had merely precipitated the wreck. Sooner or later, he told himself, she was bound to have wearied of the dullness of her lot. At any rate, dating from shortly after that disturbing night, a lack of ease and spontaneity seemed to creep into their relations. A blight settled on the home.

Little by little Minnie and he were growing almost formal towards each other. She had lost her taste for being read to in the evenings and had developed a habit of pleading a headache and going early to bed. Sometimes, catching her eye when she was not expecting it, he surprised an enigmatic look in it. It was a look, however, which he was able to read. It meant that she was bored.

It might have been expected that this state of affairs would have distressed Henry. It gave him, on the contrary, a pleasurable thrill. It made him feel that it had been worth it, going through the torments of learning to dance. The more bored she was now the greater her delight when he revealed himself dramatically. If she had been contented with the life which he could offer her as a non-dancer, what was the sense of losing weight and money in order to learn the steps? He enjoyed the silent, uneasy evenings which had supplanted those cheery ones of the first year of their marriage. The more uncomfortable they were now, the more they would appreciate their happiness later on. Henry belonged to the large circle of human beings who consider that there is acuter pleasure in being suddenly cured of toothache than in never having toothache at all.

He merely chuckled inwardly, therefore, when, on the morning of her birthday, having presented her with a purse which he knew she had long coveted, he found himself thanked in a perfunctory and mechanical way.

'I'm glad you like it,' he said.

Minnie looked at the purse without enthusiasm.

'It's just what I wanted,' she said, listlessly.

'Well, I must be going. I'll get the tickets for the theatre while I'm in town.'

Minnie hesitated for a moment.

'I don't believe I want to go to the theatre much tonight, Henry.'

'Nonsense. We must have a party on your birthday. We'll go to the theatre and then we'll have supper at Geisenheimer's again. I may be working after hours at the bank today, so I guess I won't come home. I'll meet you at that Italian place at six.'

'Very well. You'll miss your walk, then?'

'Yes. It doesn't matter for once.'

'No. You're still going on with your walks, then?'

'Oh, yes, yes.'

'Three miles every day?'

'Never miss it. It keeps me well.'

'Yes.'

'Good-bye, darling.'

'Good-bye.'

Yes, there was a distinct chill in the atmosphere. Thank goodness, thought Henry, as he walked to the station, it would be different tomorrow morning. He had rather the feeling of a young knight who has done perilous deeds in secret for his lady, and is about at last to receive credit for them.

Geisenheimer's was as brilliant and noisy as it had been before when Henry reached it that night, escorting a reluctant Minnie. After a silent dinner and a theatrical performance during which neither had exchanged more than a word between the acts, she had wished to abandon the idea of supper and go home. But a squad of police could not have kept Henry from Geisenheimer's. His hour had come. He had thought of this moment for weeks, and he visualized every detail of his big scene. At first they would sit at their table in silent discomfort. Then Sidney Mercer would come up, as before, to ask Minnie to dance. And then—then—Henry would rise and, abandoning all concealment, exclaim grandly: 'No! I am going to dance with my wife!' Stunned amazement of Minnie, followed by wild joy. Utter rout and discomfiture of that pin-head, Mercer. And then, when they returned to their table, he breathing easily and regularly as a trained dancer in

perfect condition should, she tottering a little with the sudden rapture of it all, they would sit with their heads close together and start a new life. That was the scenario which Henry had drafted.

It worked out—up to a certain point—as smoothly as ever it had done in his dreams. The only hitch which he had feared—to wit, the non-appearance of Sidney Mercer, did not occur. It would spoil the scene a little, he had felt, if Sidney Mercer did not present himself to play the role of foil; but he need have had no fears on this point. Sidney had the gift, not uncommon in the chinless, smooth-baked type of man, of being able to see a pretty girl come into the restaurant even when his back was towards the door. They had hardly seated themselves when he was beside their table bleating greetings.

'Why, Henry! Always here!'

'Wife's birthday!'

'Many happy returns of the day, Mrs Mills. We've just time for one turn before the waiter comes with your order. Come along.'

The band was staggering into a fresh tune, a tune that Henry knew well. Many a time had Mme Gavarni hammered it out of an aged and unwilling piano in order that he might dance with her blue-eyed niece. He rose.

'No!' he exclaimed grandly. 'I am going to dance with my wife!'

He had not under-estimated the sensation which he had looked forward to causing. Minnie looked at him with round eyes. Sidney Mercer was obviously startled.

'I thought you couldn't dance!'

'You never can tell,' said Henry, lightly. 'It looks easy enough. Anyway, I'll try!'

'Henry!' cried Minnie, as he clasped her.

He had supposed that she would say something like that, but hardly in that kind of voice. There is a way of saying 'Henry!' which conveys surprised admiration and remorseful devotion; but she had not said it in that way. There had been a note of horror in her voice. Henry's was a simple mind, and the obvious solution, that Minnie thought that he had drunk too much red wine at the Italian restaurant, did not occur to him.

He was, indeed, at the moment too busy to analyse vocal inflections. They were on the floor now, and it was beginning to creep upon him like a chill wind that the scenario which he had mapped out was subject to unforeseen alterations.

At first all had been well. They had been almost alone on the floor, and he had begun moving his feet along dotted line A B with the smooth vim which had characterized the last few of his course of lessons. And then, as if by magic, he was in the midst of a crowd—a mad, jiggling crowd that seemed to have no sense of direction, no ability whatever to keep out of his way. For a moment the tuition of weeks stood by him. Then, a shock, a stifled cry from Minnie, and the first collision had occurred. And with that all the knowledge which he had so painfully acquired passed from Henry's mind, leaving it an agitated blank. This was a situation for which his slidings round an empty room had not prepared him. Stage-fright at its worst came upon him. Somebody charged him in the back and asked querulously where he thought he was going. As he turned with a half-formed notion of apologizing, somebody else rammed him from the other side. He had a momentary feeling as if he were going down the Niagara Rapids in a barrel, and then he was lying on the floor with Minnie on top of him. Somebody tripped over his head.

He sat up. Somebody helped him to his feet. He was aware of Sidney Mercer at his side.

'Do it again,' said Sidney, all grin and sleek immaculateness. 'It went down big, but lots of them didn't see it.'

The place was full of demon laughter.

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'Min!' said Henry.

They were in the parlour of their little flat. Her back was towards him, and he could not see her face. She did not answer. She preserved the silence which she had maintained since they had left the restaurant. Not once during the journey home had she spoken.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked on. Outside an Elevated train rumbled by. Voices came from the street.

'Min, I'm sorry.'

Silence.

'I thought I could do it. Oh, Lord!' Misery was in every note of Henry's voice. 'I've been taking lessons every day since that night we went to that place first. It's no good—I guess it's like the old woman said. I've got two left feet, and it's no use my ever trying to do it. I kept it secret from you, what I was doing. I wanted it to be a wonderful surprise for you on your birthday. I knew how sick and tired you were getting of being married to a man who never took you out, because he couldn't dance. I thought it was up to me to learn, and give you a good time, like other men's wives. I—'

'Henry!'

She had turned, and with a dull amazement he saw that her whole face had altered. Her eyes were shining with a radiant happiness.

'Henry! Was *that* why you went to that house—to take dancing lessons?'

He stared at her without speaking. She came to him, laughing.

'So that was why you pretended you were still doing your walks?'

'You knew!'

'I saw you come out of that house. I was just going to the station at the end of the street, and I saw you. There was a girl with you, a girl with yellow hair. You hugged her!'

Henry licked his dry lips.

'Min,' he said huskily. 'You won't believe it, but she was trying to teach me the Jelly Roll!'

She held him by the lapels of his coat.

'Of course I believe it. I understand it all now. I thought at the time that you were just saying good-bye to her! Oh, Henry, why ever didn't you tell me what you were doing? Oh, yes, I know you wanted it to be a surprise for me on my birthday, but you must have seen there was something wrong. You must have seen that I thought something. Surely you noticed how I've been these last weeks?'

'I thought it was just that you were finding it dull.'

'Dull! Here, with you!'

'It was after you danced that night with Sidney Mercer. I thought the whole thing out. You're so much younger than I, Min. It didn't seem right for you to have to spend your life being read to by a fellow like me.'

'But I loved it!'

'You had to dance. Every girl has to. Women can't do without it.'

'This one can. Henry, listen! You remember how ill and worn out I was when you met me first at that farm? Do you know why it was? It was because I had been slaving away for years at one of those places where you go in and pay five cents to dance with the lady instructresses. I was a lady instructress. Henry! Just think what I went through! Every day having to drag a million heavy men with large feet round a big room. I tell you, you are a professional compared with some of them! They trod on my feet and leaned their two hundred pounds on me and nearly killed me. Now perhaps you can understand why I'm not crazy about dancing! Believe me, Henry, the kindest thing you can do to me is to tell me I must never dance again.'

'You—you—' he gulped. 'Do you really mean that you can—can stand the sort of life we're living here? You really don't find it dull?'

'Dull!'

She ran to the bookshelf, and came back with a large volume.

'Read to me, Henry, dear. Read me something now. It seems ages and ages since you used to. Read me something out of the *Encyclopaedia!*'

Henry was looking at the book in his hand. In the midst of a joy that almost overwhelmed him, his orderly mind was conscious of something wrong.

'But this is the MED-MUM volume, darling!'

'Is it? Well, that'll be all right. Read me all about "Mum"'

'But we're only in the CAL-CHA—' He wavered. 'Oh, well—I' he went on, recklessly. 'I don't care. Do you?'

'No. Sit down here, dear, and I'll sit on the floor!'

Henry cleared his throat.

"Milicz, or Militsch (d. 1374), Bohemian divine, was the most influential among those preachers and writers in Moravia and Bohemia who, during the fourteenth century, in a certain sense paved the way for the reforming activity of Huss."

He looked down. Minnie's soft hair was resting against his knee. He put out a hand and stroked it. She turned and looked up, and he met her big eyes.

'Can you beat it?' said Henry, silently, to himself.