

BROUN HEYWOOD

THE BOY
GREW OLDER

Heywood Broun
The Boy Grew Older

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Heywood Broun

The Boy Grew Older

Book I

CHAPTER I

"Your son was born ten minutes ago," said the voice at the other end of the wire.

"I'll be up," replied Peter Neale, "right away."

But it wasn't right away. First he had to go upstairs to the card room and settle his losses. Indeed he played one more pot for when he returned to the table his deal had come around again. He felt that it was not the thing to quit just then. The other men might think he had timed his departure in order to save the dollar ante. He dealt the cards and picked up four spades and a heart. Eventually, he paid five dollars to draw and again he had four spades and a heart. Nevertheless, he bet ten dollars but it was no go. His hands shook as he dropped the two blue chips in the centre of the table. The man with a pair of jacks noticed that and called. Peter threw his cards away.

"I've got nothing – a busted flush. I want to cash in now. I owe for two stacks. That's right, isn't it? I haven't any chips left. If somebody'll lend me a fountain pen I'll make out a check. I guess I need a check too. Any kind'll do. I can cross the name off."

"Why are you quitting so soon?" asked the banker as Peter waved the check back and forth to let it dry. "We're all going to quit at seven o'clock."

"Two rounds and a consolation pot," corrected somebody across the table.

Peter was curiously torn between reticence and an impulse to tell. He felt a little as if he might begin to cry. When he spoke his voice was thick. "I've got to go up to see my son," he said. "He's just been born."

He shoved the check over to the banker and was out of the room before anybody could say anything.

He thought that the banker said, "Congratulations," as he slammed the door behind him, but he could not be certain of it.

All the way up in the taxi he worried. The hospital was half a mile away. He wished that the nurse had said, "A fine boy," but he remembered it was just, "Your son was born ten minutes ago."

"If anything had been wrong," he thought, "she wouldn't have said it over the telephone."

"Is everything all right?" was his first question when a nurse came to the door of the small private hospital and let him in. "My name's Peter Neale," he explained. "My son's just been born half an hour ago."

"Everything's fine, Mr. Neale," she said and she smiled. "The baby weighs nine pounds. Mrs. Neale is fine too. You can see them both, but she's asleep now. You can't really see her today, but I think they'll let you have a good look at your son. He's a little darling."

Peter was reassured but irritated. Formula was all over the remark, "He's a little darling." He thought she ought not to use it until she had learned to do it better. Some place or other he had read that babies were fearfully homely. Still it didn't look so bad when he came into the room. Black was smudged all around the eyes which gave the child a rakish look.

"Miss Haine," said the nurse who brought him in, "this is Mr. Neale."

"Mr. Neale," she added, "meet your son." Then she went out.

"Is he all right, Miss Haine?" was Peter's first question as soon as the door closed. After all, the other woman was just supposed to answer the bell. Miss Haine might know more about it.

"He's a cherub," said Miss Haine.

"How did his eyes get blacked?" Peter wanted to know.

"Oh that's just the silver nitrate. We always put that on a baby's eyes to make sure – Look what a fine head he has."

Peter bent closer. The baby was not nearly so red as he had expected. As for the head he didn't see why it was fine. He had no notion of just what made a head fine anyway. The child kept wrinkling up its face, but it was not crying. There was nothing about his son to which Peter could take specific exception, but somehow he was disappointed. When he had said down at the New York Newspaper Club, "I've got to go up and see my son," the phrase "my son" had thrilled him. But this wasn't "my son." It was just a small baby. It seemed to him as distant as a second cousin.

"He is sweet," remarked Miss Haine.

"Yes," said Peter, but he felt that any extension of the discussion would merely promote hypocrisy on both sides. "Can I see my wife?" he asked.

"Come this way," said Miss Haine. "You can only stay a second. I'm pretty sure she's asleep."

Maria was asleep and snoring hard. Miss Haine took up one arm which was flung outside the cover and found the pulse of the sleeping girl and as she felt it she smiled reassuringly. "Yes," she said, "she's doing fine."

"And now," she added, "I'm going to bundle you off. There really isn't anything around here for a father to do. This isn't your job, you know. I'm going to let you come back in the morning, but not before ten."

Peter learned later that one of the strongest factors in Maria's resentment against having a baby was that he was implicated in the affair so slightly. He tried to tell her that she ought to blame biology and not him, but she said there was nothing in the scheme of creation which arranged that fathers should be playing cards when their sons were born. It had an air of reckless indifference about it which maddened her. Peter knew that he could not explain to her that he had not been free in spirit during the afternoon. He simply could not bear to stay out of a single pot. Hour after hour he kept coming in on middle straights and three flushes. Never before had he done anything like that. But she knew so little about poker that there was no use in telling her any of this. Indeed he realized that he had made a mistake in venturing his one answer. Maria was in nowise pacified when he said, "But I lost fifty dollars."

CHAPTER II

Peter saw Maria only once after that and then for a few minutes. Most of the time she wept. "She's getting along splendidly," said Dr. Clay. "Her nervous condition isn't good," he added as an afterthought. "Somehow or other she doesn't take much interest in the baby. You would almost think she didn't like it. She'll get over that. The maternal urge is bound to have its effect in time."

Of course Peter could not know that this urge, of which the bearded doctor spoke so confidently, might be tardy. That was something which he was to learn later for two days after the baby was born he went to Goldfield for the big fight. He had made the stipulation with the managing editor that somebody else should cover the story in case his son was not yet born. The consent had been somewhat grudging and so he had no inclination to call for another respite now that the baby had actually arrived. It would have embarrassed him to say to the managing editor, "I don't want to go away now because Maria – that's my wife – doesn't like the baby." Anyhow Dr. Clay had said she was getting along splendidly except for her nerves and the maternal urge would attend to that.

And so Peter went to Goldfield and when he came back two weeks later they told him at the hospital that Maria had gone leaving the baby behind her. They were slightly apologetic. Miss Haine had been a little careless. Twelve days after Peter started for the fight Maria had dressed and walked out. Nobody around the hospital knew anything more than that about it. She had left a note and Dr. Clay had taken the extreme liberty of reading it. Medically speaking, he could not say that it indicated anything more than a highly neurotic condition. The woman was rational. He could not see his way clear to sending out a general alarm. After all he did not suppose that there was any legal way of making the young woman come back. She said she was going to sail for Paris and he supposed she had. Dr. Clay offered sympathy and some observations gleaned in twenty years of practice about the Latin temperament.

Peter said nothing in reply. He did not want to discuss it. He felt lost and gone but not altogether startled. Now that it had happened he realized that he should have known that Maria might do something just like that. It was an altogether silly arrangement that she should have had a baby.

"The youngster's fine," said Dr. Clay. "It must be a comfort to you to know that you've still got him. I believe he's having his bath now. Wouldn't you like to come up and see him. It's quite an exciting event I can assure you."

Peter didn't want to be excited and it didn't appeal to him as a sporting event anyhow. Would Dr. Clay allow him to lie down on his couch for a little while. Later he'd come up and talk about what to do with the baby. He supposed the hospital didn't want it very much longer anyway. After Clay had gone he cried a little. That didn't necessarily mean much. Only the Thursday before he had cried at the ringside in Goldfield when Battling Nelson knocked out Joe Gans. Then it had been partly rage because thousands around him had shouted "Knock his block off. Kill the nigger." And he had seen someone very beautiful slowly crumple up before a slab-sided, bristling, little man who had no quality of skill or grace. Nelson had just kept coming in and in. He never stepped back. Often he took a blow in the face rather than bother to stop for an instant from swinging his own short arms at the brown belly in front of him. The victory had seemed altogether mechanical. Gans had not been knocked out so much as clawed to pieces by a threshing machine. And it was Gans Peter had thought of two years ago when he first saw Maria Algarez dance. She had that same amazing suddenness of movement. When he first saw her she was standing still in the middle of the huge stage. And then everything about her had come to life. There was never any feeling that she was thinking about what to do. No roll call was carried on in her mind before she kicked or leaped, or flung an arm above her head. The left jab of Joe Gans was like that too.

Peter went to the stage door and thought he had made up his mind to stop her and speak to her. He found that he hadn't. She came out slowly and when he stared at her she looked straight at

him and almost smiled. He could not be quite sure of it because that was the very moment something inside rapidly wheeled him about and sent him all but running out of the alley. Later he was more enterprising. The dramatic critic at his request introduced him to the press agent of "Adios" and the press agent introduced him to Maria Alvarez. She had just finished her dance. Peter was standing in the wings and people were telling him not to.

"Perhaps Mlle. Alvarez will take us up to her dressing-room," said the press agent.

"It is not mine," said Maria, "I am not a star. The eight Bandana Sisters dress with me. But never mind. Here they come. It is now their turn on the stage. You will have to climb two flights of stairs, Mr. Neale. You do not mind? Yes?"

"I do," said the press agent. "But that scores for you. You're the one he wants to see."

And so Peter found himself alone in one corner of the long dressing-room of Maria Alvarez and the eight Bandana Sisters. All sorts of clothes were scattered over the room. Maria sat down on a chair and stretched out her feet. There was another chair nearby but somebody's stockings were on it. Peter stood up. Maria looked at him and smiled with no particular merriment. She was tired. Peter shifted from one foot to another through a long pause.

"Are they really sisters?" he asked.

"Just two," said Maria. "Vonnice is the sister to Boots. The rest they are all mixed. It could not be that there should be eight such bad dancers in the one family."

"I think you're the greatest dancer I ever saw."

Maria nodded. "Yes, I am the great dancer. It is smart for you to know that. The others they do not know. When Boots was sick, Mr. Casey – he is our stage manager – he wanted me to go on in her place. He said he would give me \$5 a week more. He is stupid Mr. Casey. I do not dance like that. It is not for me."

"We'll be miss, miss, missed in Mississipp," she hummed and made a face. "One, two, three, four, lie down on the stomach and kick first the right leg and then the left leg and then kick both legs. That was what he wanted Maria Alvarez to do. How is it you know? It is so smart. Here throw down those stockings on the floor and take the chair. I want to hear you say more about why I am so great a dancer."

Peter lifted the stockings as if they had been little kittens and placed them on the long shelf under the electric lights.

"I don't know why," he said. "It just seems so easy when you do things. And the thing you dance to; I think that's the best tune in the show."

Maria was merry now for the first time. "Again you are smart. It is 'The Invitation to the Waltz' of Weber. 'Miss, Miss, Missed' is not so good. That is right. And some time you will tell about me in your newspaper and say that I am a great dancer?"

"I can't," said Peter. "I don't write about the theatre. I only write about sports. Baseball, you know and football and prizefights and things like that."

"Never mind, you and I know, it will be our secret. We will tell none of the others."

Up the stairs there came a tramping and shouting and all eight Bandanas rushed into the room approximately at the same time.

"I'm going," said Peter jumping up hastily.

"Don't you mind us Bandanas," shouted Vonnice across the room. "We don't take off anything for half an hour."

"Goodbye," said Peter. "Excuse me, ladies."

Maria held his hand for one and two thirds seconds. "You must come again. I want that you should tell me more about our secret."

Vonnice held the door open for Peter. "You come when we're all here," she said. "There isn't a nickle's worth of harm in the lot of us. But that Maria there is a vamp, a baby Spanish vamp. Will you remember that."

"I'll remember."

As Peter went down the stairs he was trying to see if he could hum the thing that Maria said was "The Invitation to the Waltz" by Weber. He wasn't good at it. And besides it was all mixed up and racketing around in his head with, "We'll be miss, miss, missed in Mississipp."

Peter went to the show the next night and after that the alley. He stood scrunched up against a wall for a time but he felt too conspicuous. He was afraid that somebody would come up to him suddenly and say, "What are you hanging around here for?" It didn't make much difference who said it, the door man, a stage hand, a scrub woman, anyone would have sufficient authority to terrify him. His mind leaped beyond that and he had a vision of a policeman laying a hand upon his shoulder and saying, "I arrest you on the charge of mashing." After that would come the trial and the sentence. Peter moved out of the alley. He had no notion of just what were the fixed post rights of anybody waiting at a stage door to see an actress. Walking seemed safer and he took up a beat along the side street which ran at right angles to the alley.

His pace was brisk and he succeeded pretty well in developing the air of a man bent upon getting to some important engagement five or six miles away. Of course, every time he passed the alley it was possible to sweep it with a glance over his shoulder. Even a man in a hurry has a right to notice a tributary of chorus girls, musicians and actors sweeping into his street. First came the musicians. Then one girl. Then two and presently the flood. Peter did not dare to be too detached any more. Fortunately he found the window of a cigar store just at the corner where the alley turned into the street. By pretending an interest in the special sale of genuine imported English briar pipes Peter was able to keep close watch upon everyone who came from the stage door and at the same time seem not quite a prominent clubman. But one of the pipes, possibly the calabash cut to \$2.21, must have commanded more than fictitious interest, for Peter was suddenly startled by a clutch at his left arm. He tugged away and turned at the same moment.

"Unhand me, woman," said Vonnie, but she immediately took his arm again. "I knew you'd come," she said. "It was that look you threw at me over your shoulder when you went out yesterday."

"I haven't come," said Peter. "I just happened to be going by."

"But you are glad to see me?"

"Of course I am."

"And you'll walk home with me to keep me from being unprotected on the streets of a great city at night. It's only about twelve blocks. You don't need to take a taxi."

"Honest, I can't. I wish I could. I'm awful sorry."

Vonnie began to laugh. "I wonder why it is that when they come big they haven't got any sense. 'I knew I could rule you the day we were wed,' she hummed, 'for thick in the middle is thick in the head.'"

"What did I do that was stupid? And I'm not thick in the middle."

"Well, that's a fact. I don't know your name but your figure is grand. I guess you find being so handsome you don't need any sense."

"I have so too got sense. What have I done?"

"Well, you're just so serious I can't go on kidding you. Don't you suppose I knew you were waiting for Maria? And I know a lot more than that. You keep looking at that girl the way you did yesterday afternoon and all of a sudden you'll find rice in your ears."

"All right," said Peter, "I guess I can stand that."

"Here comes the bride – watch your step," and Vonnie went up the street as Maria came around the corner.

"Hello," said Maria, "what was it you talked about to Vonnie?"

"She thinks we're going to get married."

"And what is it you think?"

"I'd like it."

"Because I am the great dancer you think I ought to be the wife. So? It is funny. But it is not so funny. We can talk about it again. Now I am so tired that I just want to hear you say one thing and that is about the dancing and me."

"I think you were just fine," said Peter.

CHAPTER III

I

Maria was right. They did talk about it again and largely because Peter surprised himself and her with enterprise. It was raining hard that night when she came out into the alley. Peter grown bold was standing not more than two feet away from the stage door at a spot where a projecting fire escape offered some shelter from the rain. A big puddle lay all the way across the alley.

"Here," said Peter, almost casually and he picked Maria up and carried her across.

"Thank God, there's no winding staircase," Vonnie shouted after them.

Still it was an entirely natural and easy thing to keep one arm around Maria when they got into the taxicab. She rested her head against his shoulder. Peter realized then that he ought to kiss her. After all he had known her three weeks. It seemed the conventional thing to do. Besides he wanted to. She said nothing until the second time.

"I like the quiet ones better, Peter, my hermit. It is nice to lean against you. With you the taxi does not jounce so much. Part of my tiredness it goes into your arm."

"Won't you marry me?" asked Peter.

"Because we have kissed? And I have put my head on your shoulder? You would make me the honest woman?"

"I want to marry you."

"First we must have some supper. Maybe it is that you are just hungry. It is not upon an empty stomach to talk about getting married."

Maria would not take the table which the headwaiter offered. "No that other. The little one in the corner."

After they had ordered Maria took up a long bread stick and began breaking it into little pieces in her hand.

"Peter," she said, "I must make you very sad. Maybe I will be a little sad. You do not think I am good?"

Peter stared at her.

"That is too bad. I am not good, not very good. You know what I mean. You have heard the actress in the play say, 'I am a good woman?' Maria is not. I do not know why I tell you but I will. First it was three years ago in Paris. He was married and I knew that. I do not even like him much but I go. It was wrong. It was not so wrong another time because that boy I like a little. Now it was Mr. Casey, our manager, I told you he was a fool. That I could not help. He is such a fool. I try to get the job and he does not say you can dance. He say to me, 'I am a nice man and you are a nice girl.' What is there for me to say except 'yes.' About the dance he does not know anything. What is the use for me to say, 'No, I am not the nice girl, I am the great dancer.' Even if he would watch me dance he would not know. And so for the week-end at Long Beach I was the nice girl. I cannot help it that people are fools. It does not make me sad, but I am sad because now you are unhappy."

But Peter was not exactly unhappy. He knew that by all the rules he should be broken-hearted or raging. He wondered why he had no impulse to shoot Casey. As a matter of fact he could think of nothing more silly. His mind kept turning back to a play he had seen once called "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray." In that the heroine had confessed in the first act to the man she was going to marry. It was thrilling Peter found to have somebody confessing to him. Maria the dancer was romantic, but Maria the adventuress was a whole leap beyond that into the realm of fantasy. He stole a glance around the long room and everywhere he saw men and women talking. Some were laughing and some

were earnest. "But," he thought to himself, "probably this is the only table in the room where anybody is making a confession."

And besides all the dramatic values of the situation, he was not quite unconscious of the comic ones. There sat Maria, at least five feet high and looking about ten years old, gravely lifting up one corner of life a little gingerly to spare the feelings of Peter Neale, the best known sporting writer in America. But every other impression was swept away by the sudden feeling that it was extraordinarily honest for Maria to tell him all this. It was more than that. It was like cheering when the Yale captain got up again. It was sportsmanship.

Peter reached across the table and patted her hand. "I'm not sad, Maria. I think it was awfully white of you to tell me. I'm not exactly a good man myself. Anyhow things are different with you. Those things you said are nothing. You know the way I feel is that you're an artist and it's nobody's business what you do. We don't have to talk about that any more. There's something else. You remember what we were saying in the taxicab. You've had two pieces of bread now and a glass of water. Won't you marry me?"

"Yes," said Maria, "I'm going to marry you."

II

Peter was surprised the day they went down to get the license to discover that Maria was twenty-three. He was only twenty-six himself. Maria had seemed a child. Nineteen would have been his guess.

"Maybe," she said, "you will not want me because I am so old."

"You could be a hundred," Peter answered.

They were to be married the next day but when he met her at the theatre in the evening she told him that Dolly Vance was ill and that Mr. Casey wanted her to take over four of the sick girl's numbers. "I have to come to the theatre at ten o'clock and rehearse all the day."

"Then we'll get married at nine. I'm not going to take a chance like that. I've read about it in books. The whole house will be cheering you and then you'll ask for waivers on me. I want to get you signed up."

"Pooh, for me they will not cheer. These are the jazz dances. They are not for me. And Peter, oh, Peter, I must sing."

"Can you sing?"

"Yes, my hermit, I am almost so good a singer as a dancer. And I could play the piano if there was any one smart enough to know. You see I bring you the dowry."

A very bored Alderman said that they were man and wife, but there was some excitement when they came out of the City Hall and two newspaper photographers took their pictures. Peter was proud of the fact that both the camera men made a point of treating him as a person of a good deal of importance. "You see," he said, "I'm somebody in my business."

"The paper you work on what is the name?"

"It's called the Bulletin."

"And what is it they pay you?"

"Well, with my share of the syndicate and all that it amounts to about \$100 a week."

"One hundred dollars a week! That is funny. My pay it is \$50. I have caught a millionaire. Peter, why do they pay you \$100 a week?"

"I don't know, Maria –"

"One hundred dollars a week to write about the baseball game! Fifty dollars a week to Maria Alvarez. My God, what a country! I do not like that, Peter. Still, it does not matter so much. Maybe I am glad that you are rich. You can buy me a piano and I will show you that I know how to play Chopin. You would like that."

"That'll be fine," said Peter.

"Where was it that you learned so much about this baseball that they pay you \$100 for the week?"

"I used to play myself at Harvard. At least I played one year. I pitched against Yale and shut 'em out. The next year I got fired because I couldn't learn French."

"But that is so easy, the French. I do not know what it is to shut Yale out."

"Of course it's easy for you. You lived there, you told me ever since you were five. Any foreigner ought to be able to speak French."

"But I am not. I am now the American, I know that. I am Mrs. Peter Neale."

"Oh," she said, and made a fearful grimace, "that you must never call me. It must be that I am still Maria Algarez. Mrs. Peter Neale I do not know. Maria Algarez she will not die. Oh no, Peter, you understand that?"

"It's all right with me," said Peter. "I'm just going to call you Maria any way."

"And, Peter, I forgot, you have a father and a mother and the relations for me to meet."

"Not a one. I've got an uncle in Salt Lake City. That's a long way off if you don't know. But how about you?"

"Maybe, who can tell. They are no good. I do not care. Perhaps they are dead. Peter, you are all I have in the world. That is why you must buy me the grand piano."

They went straight from the City Hall to the theatre and Peter left her. He was not to see her again until after the performance. Of course he went to the show and sat in the second row. But Maria did not see him when she came on to do the first of her new numbers. Or at any rate she made no sign of recognition. She kept her eyes intently on the conductor's baton. And then she began to sing. Even Peter had an inkling of the fact that here was a lovely voice. If he had not been married to Maria Algarez at nine o'clock that morning he would still have been caught up in the excitement of the theatre. Almost everybody stopped coughing. They honestly cheered and they kept it up. Nine times Maria sang the chorus and five times more she came out to bow. Her fourth song was the last number in the play with the exception of the parade of all the nations and nobody paid any attention to that. They just kept on applauding and shouting. Peter argued with the stage door man.

"I have to see Maria Algarez," he said. "I have to, I tell you. I'm her husband."

"Write your name down on a piece of paper, and I'll take it up and see what she says."

In three or four minutes he returned. "Miss Algarez says you're to come up. It's number twelve. Two flights up at the head of the stairs."

Peter knocked.

"Come in," said Maria. She had thrown the blue and gold costume in a corner, and slipped on a kimono.

"It was marvelous," said Peter; "nobody's ever heard anything like it in a theatre. They're still cheering and applauding for you."

"For all that applause I do not give a damn," answered Maria and snapped her fingers. "As long as you like. That is all."

Peter kissed her. "Maria, I was afraid I'd lost you." He held her at arm's length and the kimono slipped down over one shoulder. "Cover yourself up," said Peter almost sharply. Maria pulled the wrap back and folded it closely around her. Peter had never seen that smile before.

"A husband," she said. "It is different."

CHAPTER IV

I

Maria blamed a good many things upon the institution of marriage for which the explanation probably lay elsewhere. If Peter had been a lover rather than a husband he would still have been insensitive to Chopin. In all the range of Maria's repertoire he was never able to detect more than a single tune. That itself seemed to him an achievement for the Fantaisie Impromptu had not yet been discovered to be actually, "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows." But as a matter of fact Peter did not really understand Maria Algarez any better than he understood Chopin. He loved her throughout the year of their married life but he was not happy.

"It is the curse of the witch on you," she said, "or maybe it is not the witch but that America of yours. There is something in you, Peter, that will not let you be happy. You are afraid of it. Of me you are afraid, Peter."

He protested that this was not so but Maria knew better.

"Love – what you call sex – that is one of the things which has frightened you the most of any. Somebody has put black thoughts into that head. Yes, I tell you it is so. A terrible thing has been done to you. Somebody has brought you up carefully."

But in an instant she had come across the room to him and had a protecting arm about him.

"Now I have made you the more sad. You must tell me what it is."

"I can't, Maria. I don't know whether I know. But anyhow I can't."

"Perhaps it is the sound of it which you fear. You tell me. You must. Whisper it."

Peter did whisper. "You remember that night you told me – you told me about the others."

"You mean those oh so few lovers. But that did not make you sad then. You were not angry."

"I'm not angry now. But I can't help it, Maria, that I worry."

"And for what do you worry?"

"I think that maybe those other lovers they made you happier than I can."

"So! That I should have known. You think you are not the so great lover. These men they are gone but they are still your rivals. Perhaps I remember. That is it?"

"Yes," said Peter.

He was startled when Maria laughed.

"Why do you laugh at me?"

"It is to you like the baseball game. It is what you call it? Oh yes, a competition."

Peter made no answer.

"Now listen to me, Peter. You I love the most of anybody in the world. I tell you that but it is not enough. You still worry. Something I must do to show you. This blackness I must drive away. Peter, you must have a baby. Yes, it is a son you need. Then you can worry about him."

Maria spoke upon the conviction but also upon impulse and babies are not born that way. The time of her trial beat fiercely upon her. She had to quit the show just a day after a new rôle and several new songs were promised to her. During the last three months of her pregnancy she never left the apartment. "I do not want anybody to point at me," she told Peter, "and say that is Maria Algarez who did the Butterfly Dance in 'Adios.'"

...

In the note which Dr. Clay handed to Peter, Maria had written: "I did keep my promise. It is a baby and a son. That was all I promised. More I cannot do. Peter, I must be Maria Alvarez, the dancer. I cannot be the wife and the mother. You should not be sad altogether. I think it is good that we have met. When you look at your son you will forget some of the rubbish that was in your head. That is more than that you should remember Maria Alvarez. And the boy, Peter, remember it is fair that from life he should get fun. Thank God, nobody can ever make of him the wife and mother. Miss Haine says he is like me. If that is so, Peter, you may have much trouble. But leave him just a little bad."

The last sentence was hard to decipher. Peter could not make out whether Maria had written, "I love you," or "I loved you."

II

Peter must have gone to sleep eventually on the sofa in the reception room of Dr. Clay's hospital. It was almost dark when he woke. He had been dreaming hard. In the dream some vague figure, forgotten by the time he awoke, presented him with a small lion cub as a pet. Throughout the dream Peter worried about the lion cub. The apartment house in which he lived had a strict rule against dogs. The janitor did not actually come into the dream, but much of Peter's sleeping consciousness was concerned with planning arguments for that official. "But it isn't a dog," Peter was prepared to say, "it's a lion. Your rules don't say anything about lions. Anyhow it's only a little lion." There had been a lion cub in Battling Nelson's camp and Peter had often watched the fighter fool around with it and slap the animal when it tried to nip him. Nelson had a trick of rubbing the rough stubble of his beard against the lion's nose. Peter hated that.

Disentangling himself from his dream he decided that his nightmare had been an echo he remembered from Goldfield. It took him several minutes to get himself back from the Nevada fight to the hospital in New York. While he slept he had forgotten that Maria had run away and that his son was in a room upstairs. He was about to skirmish out in search of one of the nurses when Dr. Clay came into the room.

"Feeling any better?" asked the doctor.

"I feel all right. I'm all ready to take the baby now."

"You don't need to be in any hurry about that, Mr. Neale. Better let him stay till tomorrow. It's after six now. Suppose we go up and watch the little fellow get bathed. I asked Miss Haine to postpone that so you could see him."

Peter realized that his presence at the bath seemed to be obligatory in the mind of the doctor. He went up the stairs to the same room which he had visited the fortnight before when he rushed away from the poker game. There could be no possible question about finding the right door for the hall was filled with loud howling.

"They never like it," said Dr. Clay.

"Is there any other reason for doing it?" asked Peter, but the physician made no answer.

The baby was propped up against one end of the tub rubbing at his eyes and Miss Haine was sloshing his chest with water from a sponge.

She looked up and said, "He's just fine, Mr. Neale. I'm not really hurting him."

Peter found that a dim shadow of personality had descended upon his son in the two weeks since he had last seen him. The face was too crowded with tears and fingers to make much of an impression, but Peter, making room for the doctor, walked around behind the tub and from the shoulders of the child he received his first thrill. They were square high shoulders without the suggestion of a curve.

Christy Mathewson, the rookie pitcher of the Giants, whom Peter Neale had recently hailed in his column as a coming baseball star had shoulders just like that. And it was a fine assertive chest.

"He'll be a big man some day," said Miss Haine lifting up one of the baby's feet. "Remember he's got to grow up to these."

But no sooner was his foot lifted than the child began to howl louder than ever. Peter suddenly reached toward him.

"Look out," cried Miss Haine in alarm. "You mustn't touch his head."

Peter cared nothing about the head. It was the high boxed shoulders which he wanted, for some reason, to touch. He patted the child twice. "I wouldn't cry like that," he said. But the child continued.

"He thinks I put soap in his eyes," explained Miss Haine. "Tell him I didn't."

Peter thought it would be silly to say anything like that to the baby. He patted him twice more and said, "There, there."

"You're going to have your bottle in just a minute now," cooed Miss Haine, drying the child with a vigor which it resented. She put him back into his crib and presented the bottle.

Instantly he ceased crying and drank noisily. He drank a good deal more than he could conveniently swallow and milk began to spill out at the corners of his mouth. The flash of interest which had animated Peter died away. Indeed his feeling slumped down through indifference to dislike.

"I suppose," said Miss Haine, "you're going to keep him on cow's milk from now on."

"Cow's milk?" said Peter. "That's what he's got in the bottle now, isn't it? It's all right for him, I suppose?"

"In theory," said Dr. Clay, "bottle babies don't do quite so well, but it doesn't make much difference. I imagine more than half the children in New York today are brought up on bottles."

"By the way," he continued, "I don't want to pry into your affairs, Mr. Neale, but I suppose the little fellow's got a grandmother or somebody you can turn him over to."

"No," said Peter, "he hasn't got any grandmother that I know of. I guess we'll just have to get along without one."

"I can give you the telephone number of an agency where you could get a trained nurse for him. That would insure expert care for a month or so while you're looking around trying to make some more permanent arrangement."

Peter shook his head. He had come to hate the hospital. Any starched person would remind him constantly of Maria and her letter and her running away.

"I think I've got somebody," he said. He was thinking of Kate. She had been part of his life before he met Maria. And then there couldn't be any scandal concerning Kate. She was about sixty. Before the baby was born Kate had discussed the possibility of his paying her more than she got for part time housekeeping and letting her be a nurse for the child.

"Well, whoever you get," advised Dr. Clay, "I want you to buy this book. I'll write it down for you – it's Dr. Kerley's, I've always found it the best – and have her follow the directions carefully."

Peter put the slip in his pocket. "I'll come around for the baby at ten," he said. He took one more glance at the crib, but the milk guzzling still continued. He left without saying goodbye to anybody except Miss Haine and Dr. Clay. As he went out the front door he suddenly said, "Damn!" He remembered that Kate couldn't read.

CHAPTER V

On the way back to the flat in West Sixty-sixth Street, Peter stopped at a store and asked for Dr. Kerley's book. The clerk was sorry that it was not in stock. Of course he could order it.

"I want something right away," said Peter. They rummaged around on a shelf marked miscellaneous and found, "Your Child," and "The Christian Nursery." Neither seemed from its title quite to answer the needs of Peter, but since there was nothing else he took them both. Arriving at his flat in West Sixty-sixth Street three doors away from Central Park, Peter found Kate on hand. He had seen her just for a minute on his return from Goldfield but not since he had learned his news at the hospital. He did not know whether or not she knew.

"My wife's gone away," he said. "And she won't be back."

"Yes, sir," replied Kate. Peter liked her for that. Whether she was surprised or not she made no sign.

"Now," he continued, "I've got to bring the baby back here tomorrow. It's a boy. There isn't anybody I know to turn him over to. I want you to come and live here and be his nurse. I'll pay you fifteen dollars a week. You remember you said you would come for ten when we were talking about it before. I'm going to pay you more because you'll have to do the whole job now."

"I want one night a week off, Mr. Neale," said Kate.

"That'll be all right if you make it Sunday. I guess I can learn enough to take care of him once a week. I've got a couple of books here that tell how to do it. This baby's going to be brought up right, Kate. I want you to read these books too."

"Mr. Neale, I've broke my glasses and I can't see print at all without them. I'm an old woman, Mr. Neale."

"That's all right, Kate, I'll read you some of it so we can be ready for this baby when he comes tomorrow. Don't stand up. Sit down, Kate. This is called 'Your Child.' It's written by a woman named Alice Carter Scott."

Peter opened the book and decided to skip the preface.

"I had a sister in Brooklyn once," said Kate, "that was married to a man named Scott. She's dead these ten years, God rest her soul."

"It says," began Peter, skimming over the first page and deciding that a summary would be sufficient, "that the most important task in the world and the greatest blessing is to bring up children."

"The first years of the child's life" he read, "roughly speaking from birth to the age of six, constitute the most important period of the child's whole existence."

He skimmed ahead again until he found a heading, "Constructive Suggestions."

"First of all," he read, "I would say that the home cannot be a normal home unless the mother herself is a normal being –"

Peter tried to skip ahead rapidly. "She must learn to discriminate between the essentials and the non-essentials in life. She must give the best of herself to important things and she must learn to eliminate or subordinate the non-important –" Here Peter broke off and put the book down.

"This doesn't seem to be much good for us," he said. "It's all too general. Maybe we can get something more out of this one. This one's called 'The Christian Nursery,' That doesn't sound much good, but we'll see. 'Functions of the Family –' 'The Functions of the family in human life are five-fold: (1) biological; (2) educational; (3) moral; (4) social; (5) religious.'"

He put it down impatiently. "These aren't what I wanted at all. I'll have to go and get that Dr. Kerley book they told me about in the hospital. I can get it in the morning."

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Neale," said Kate, "there's no need for me to have a book about babies. I raised five children and buried four. I'm not saying, mind you, that books aren't the great things for wisdom but it's not wisdom that little children do be needing. The Blessed Virgin herself,

she didn't have to read in no books. I'll be bringing him up like he was my own son, Mr. Neale, and that's better than you'll be finding in all your fine books."

Peter was disposed to argue the proposition that all a woman needs to know about motherhood can be learned by having some children, but Kate got up and walked out into the kitchen to show that the interview was over. Peter never did get around to buying Dr. Kerley even for his own education. Still he could not quite dismiss the little he had read that night. He could not remember whether it was in the Christian book or the other that he had come across the paragraph about the mother – "She must learn to discriminate between the essentials and the non-essentials in life." He wondered whether it was essential that Maria should devote herself to the gurgling little child who cried about everything but spilt milk, or that she should go on dancing to the strains of that tune by Weber. He tried to hum it and couldn't. Then he sat and thought for a long time. In reply to a question from Kate he said that he didn't want any dinner. He was going out. Would she please be at the flat at ten o'clock as he expected to have the baby back by that time.

Presently Kate went out. Peter sat by the window and looked up towards the park. He could catch a glimpse of it by leaning out. There was a moon. A wind whipped through the trees and they were swaying back and then rushing forward again whenever the gusts gave them an opening. That was a sort of dance. He turned away from the window. There was nothing in the room to remind him of Maria except the grand piano. He would get rid of that. His mind began to lose its ache. He could accept the fact that Maria had gone. He would remember her now always as he had seen her that first night standing still in the centre of the stage just before she began to dance. The sight of Maria washing a baby would have been queer. It was all right for nurses and old Irish women and sporting writers to mess around with babies and soap and rubber-tipped milk bottles. Somehow or other he was glad he had never seen the greatest dancer in all the world with a mouth full of safety pins.

CHAPTER VI

Miss Haine seemed somewhat surprised when Peter arrived at the hospital alone the next morning. "You're not going to carry him back yourself?" she said.

"Why not?"

"Have you ever held a baby?"

Peter thought back. "Not such a little one," he admitted.

"Well then, watch me," she said. "See, take him like this. If you don't he's sure to cry."

"But he's crying now," protested Peter.

"That's for some other reason. It isn't because I'm holding him wrong. All little babies cry a good deal at first. It's good for them. Any time a small baby doesn't cry a certain number of hours a day there's something wrong. You see he isn't big enough to walk, or crawl, or even roll around much and crying is the way he gets his exercise. He's getting air into his little lungs now."

"There isn't anything to be done about it?" Peter wanted to know.

"Well, of course, you must look first of all to see if there is any real reason for his crying. His skin is very sensitive. There might be a pin sticking in him. It might be that his clothes need to be changed." Miss Haine paused. "Yes, he wants to be changed now."

Peter made a step toward the door, "Oh, you'll have to learn this," said Miss Haine. "Watch me."

At the moment she seemed skilful. For the first time Peter appreciated the fact that she really was trained. But he did not know until after months of subsequent experience just what a marvel he was permitted to observe. In the course of a year or so he made progress. His improvement was tangible enough to be demonstrated in figures. Neale was given to statistics. He was the first sporting writer to keep separate averages for batters against right and lefthanded pitching. It was Peter Neale who proved years later that there were definite exceptions to the accepted theory that lefthanded batters do badly against southpaws. He was able to show that through one entire campaign Ty Cobb batted 11.692 points better against lefthanders than he did against righthanders. In much the same spirit Peter used a stop watch on himself while he was engaged in the task of changing the child. In twelve months time he was pleased to observe that his record was gradually cut down from nineteen minutes to five and a half. Later he wished it had been his privilege to time Miss Haine at this first demonstration. He was sportsman enough to admit that in all probability even his best performance after months of practice was markedly inferior to hers. Indeed he would not have been a bit surprised to learn that she had established a world's record before his very eyes. Even as a novice in the matter he knew that he had seen a marvel.

After all, in spite of Peter's ignorance of babies he did have a reportorial eye. It took him no more than a few seconds to observe that Miss Haine's phrase, "He wants to be changed," was not a particularly nice use of English. There seemed to be nothing in the world which the child wanted less. He screamed as Peter, at that time, had never heard him scream, and kicked prodigiously. Many months later when Peter had begun to perfect himself in the technique of the task he felt that perhaps he would not do at all badly in any competition limited to participants who were also parents. He was never able to challenge in any way the complete mastery of Miss Haine because she was endowed with a complete indifference. She did not allow the screaming to interfere with her efficiency in any way. The kicking never worried or angered her. She acted as if it were a natural hazard.

"There's a nice dry child for you," she said at the end of an interval which Peter subsequently estimated to have been three minutes and twenty seconds. He was also a silent child until Peter picked him up.

"Put your right hand a little lower and raise your left," advised Miss Haine. "Remember he isn't strong enough yet to hold up his head all by himself."

Peter obeyed at the moment, but he grew to have a certain contempt for all established canons of good form in regard to holding a baby. Indeed he eventually wrote an article for one of the magazines in which he maintained: "There are one hundred and fifty-two distinctly different ways of holding a baby – and all are right! At least all will do." He based this contention on the fact that the body of a small baby is soft and pliable and that a person with a strong pair of hands can get a grip pretty much any place he chooses. Still, for the moment he obeyed instructions implicitly and went down the stairs gingerly and out to the taxicab.

"That's a fine husky kid you've got there," said the driver. "Is it yours?"

"Yes," said Peter somewhat ashamed and annoyed by the fact that a suggestion of pride crept into his voice quite against his will. "It's my son."

"He certainly knows how to yell," said the driver. "I've got five but he beats 'em all."

Curiously enough the child ceased crying the instant the taxi started. The motion of the journey and possibly the sight of the trees and the river and the ships seemed to have a certain interest for it. The mouth opened into something that might have been a grin.

"That's Grant's Tomb," said Peter before he realized that whatever interest in the proceedings the child actually had it could hardly be pinned down to the particular. Climbing the two flights of stairs which led to his apartment, Peter knocked at the door briskly. Somehow or other the baby had begun to slip through his fingers and he found it impossible to reach the pocket in his vest where he kept his keys. There was no answer. Peter knocked again and still nobody came. Heaving the baby up over his shoulder he found the key after trying three wrong pockets and went into the flat. There was no one about. Kate had not arrived. Peter was alone with his son.

Panic descended upon him. He remembered, "His skin is very sensitive. A pin may be sticking into him," and he wondered if in the event of such an emergency he could possibly locate the trouble. He was still more doubtful of his ability to do anything else which might be necessary. Even in the taxicab, Peter had not felt wholly alone. After all the driver had said that he was the father of five. This was reassuring to Peter. He had a mind which hopped ahead. He had been quite alive to the arrival of a contingency upon which he would find it necessary to tap upon the window and say, "Never mind the car for a minute. What should I do now?"

Fortunately, the conduct of the baby was more admirable than anything Peter had yet known. He put it in the middle of the bed where it promptly went to sleep. Peter sat in a chair close by and watched. Suddenly something happened which startled him. Without waking the child rolled over and buried its head in the pillow face downward. Peter knew that it would not smother. He had slept exactly that way himself for twenty-five years.

There was no clock in the house and Peter had no notion of how long he waited. Presently the child woke and began to cry petulantly. A search for pins was resented and the wailing took on its characteristic vigor.

"Don't do that," said Peter. He picked the child up, carried it to the window and back again without good results. Then he said, "Listen!" Peter cleared his throat. "Rockabye, baby, on the tree top," he began but to no avail. He wasn't very sure of the tune. There was only one song of which he was confident. "Oh, Harvard was old Harvard when Yale was but a pup," struck up Peter. "And Harvard will be Harvard still when Yale is all gone up, And if any Eli son of a –."

Instinctively Peter began to hum the rest. It did not seem to him just the sort of song he should sing to his baby. And yet it proved exactly right. The child went off to sleep again and remained that way while Peter disentangled it. A few minutes later Kate came in. "I was thinking, Mr. Neale," she said, "that there was no clothes for the child." She stepped across to the bed. "Oh, the little angel. Now the deep sleep does be on him. I found some old things and brought them. I hope he was no trouble to you."

"No," said Peter, mopping his forehead. "He wasn't so much trouble. Have you got everything you need? I'm going to leave you some money for milk and food and things. Can you stay with him right along now till your day off?"

"I can that."

"Well, let's see. This is Tuesday. I'm going out for awhile. I won't be back tonight. Maybe I won't be back tomorrow. Anyhow I'll be back before Sunday. Take good care of him."

Peter had to steady himself going down the stairs to the street. He was shaky and wringing with perspiration. He felt as if he had pitched a nine inning game with the score nothing to nothing all the way. He just had to get out of the house. The ache which had died down the night before was back again. "I guess I've got to get drunk," thought Peter.

CHAPTER VII

When Peter reached the corner he found that it was only half-past twelve. It was much too early to get drunk. Daylight drinking had always seemed to him disgusting. As a matter of fact, he was contemplating the spree merely as a means to an end. In order to forget Maria he must think of someone else and it would suit his purpose that the other person should be someone rowdy and degraded. He would rub himself with mud to ease the numbness of his spirit. He knew that he could never do it without drinking. First many gates must be unlocked. Maria had been right when she said that Peter was afraid of sex. When he was quite a small boy somebody had told him about flowers and it meant nothing to him. It had seemed merely a fairy story rather more dull than usual. Much later a red-haired boy who lived five houses away had talked to Peter and frightened and disgusted him. After that he had run away when other boys tried to tell him anything about these mysteries. Of course his squeamishness had been marked and he became the butt of every youngster with any talent for smut. Finding that flight was useless Peter adopted a new system and fought fiercely with anyone who taunted him. He was bigger and stronger than most of the other boys and he soon piled up an imposing list of victims to his prowess. He fought so well that his ignorance remained almost unimpaired. Once when he was in the act of belaboring a companion who had tried to outline for him the plot of a book called "Only A Boy," a woman passing by had interrupted the fight. She wanted to know if Peter was not ashamed of himself. Defensively he answered that the other boy had been "talking dirty." Immediately the passerby deluged Peter with admiration. She took down his name and address and later he received by mail a Bible, leather bound, and on the flyleaf was the inscription "To a young Sir Galahad." Peter never took any particular pride in this gift.

He knew in his heart that his purity rested solidly on fear. He burned with curiosity. At times he actually invited lewd confidences though making every pretence of anger when they were imparted to him. Respite came to him for a year or two before he went to college because athletics became his god. He excelled all competitors in school and was generally rated the best right-handed pitcher in the metropolitan district. Baseball filled all his thoughts waking and sleeping, and in the autumn it was football, although in this branch of sport he was by no means as proficient. Indeed when he went to Harvard at the age of seventeen he was dropped from the varsity squad in the first cut and later from the freshmen.

At this particular time, when he was much more foot-loose than usual, the annual medical lecture to the Freshmen was delivered. It was known in unofficial circles as Smut One and attendance was compulsory. Very gravely and severely the old doctor unfolded his tale of horrors. The spirit was not unlike that of a traditional hell-fire sermon. Peter heard the man half through and then fainted, toppling over from his seat across an aisle. He was carried downstairs into the fresh air and did not come back. But he had heard enough to be convinced that this sex business was even worse than it had seemed in the crude and rowdy flashes which had come to him from his companions. And yet the fact that it was horrible by no means served to keep his thoughts clear of the subject. The doctor had talked entirely of the dangers and disgraces of immorality. Peter could not escape the only partially conscious surmise that unspeakable delights and wonders must lie within this circle of leaping flames. This impression was confirmed when he happened in the college library to come across a poem by Carew called "The Rapture." Sex seemed to him now by far the most romantic and adventurous thing in life. The fact that there were monsters and dragons to be dared made it all the more a piece with the unforgotten tales of childhood concerning giant killers and knights-errant.

Peter was no longer satisfied to be Galahad. He wanted to be Launcelot. And still he was afraid. He found out that Columbus Avenue in Boston was a street largely given over to women and night after night he used to slink about dark corners hoping and dreading that somebody would speak to him. Whenever a "Hello dearie" came to him out of the darkness Peter trembled. "No," he would

say, "I'm sorry. I've got a very important engagement. I've got to go right along. I must go right along. Sure, I'll be here at this same time tomorrow night."

Often he would carry on some such dialogue a dozen times in an evening and then one night a woman, more stalwart and audacious than any he had yet encountered, seized him by the arm. "Sonny," she said, "I'm not going to let you waste my time. You're not going any place except with me. Now march along."

Peter marched. That was why he told Maria Alarez that he was not quite a good man himself.

For a time disillusion supplanted turmoil in the mind of Peter. He found that the romanticists were just as fraudulent as the moralists. Don Juan seemed to him as great a fake as Galahad. Besides in the spring the call for baseball candidates came along and Peter surprised the college world by being the only Freshman to win a place on the varsity nine. He pitched the second game against Yale and won by a score of 2 to 0. Life meant something after all. Bending a third strike across the knees of a man with a Y on his chest gave a dignity to existence which it had never before possessed. Peter was done with hot thoughts and cold ones. Unfortunately he was also done with thoughts about examinations. French was his most abject failure, but he did badly enough in everything else to be told that his college days were over.

Still he was bereft of romance for no more than a month. He caught on with the sporting department of the Bulletin early in August and made an almost instantaneous hit. Here again he found satisfaction in the gait and color of life. Women were not rigorously excluded from the scheme of things, but they were not important. He saw them in the dance halls where he went after hours and talked to them and drank with them, but they served merely as minor characters. The talk which animated this existence for Peter was all of the shop. A reporter from San Francisco, named Rusk, suddenly discovered to his amazement and delight that here was a man eager to hear his tales of newspaper work along the waterfront in the days when the coast towns were still unregenerate. Everybody else on the Bulletin was in the habit of groaning loudly whenever Rusk began, "In the old days on the waterfront – ," but Peter listened with the most intense sort of interest to Rusk's entire stock of anecdotes. By and by Rusk had to make them up. He gave himself a boyhood as a jockey and also enlisted fictionally in the Spanish American war. Peter believed everything and liked everything. Four months later Rusk left the Bulletin in order to try his hand at free lancing for the magazines. His failure in that field surprised him. He had come to confuse Peter Neale and the general public.

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Peter began his spree by going to the Newspaper Club. He found no one in the big room except two old men playing chess. One of them did weather and the other fish on the New York Press. They were not communicative and neither seemed disposed to be drawn into conversation. And so for a time Peter watched the game. He found it impossible to work up any enthusiasm about the issue and departed to practice pool on a table at the other end of the room. Caring nothing about performance, Peter was surprised to discover that the most difficult shots all came off. Nothing was too hard. Even the most fantastically complicated combinations plopped the required ball into a pocket.

Far from being pleased at this Peter grew angry. He felt that Fate was ironically evening up things for him by burdening him with luck and prowess in something which made no difference and withholding its favor in all the important aspects of life. Testing out his theory he picked up a straggler, a man he knew but slightly, who happened to wander into the club at that moment.

"I'll roll you Indian dice," challenged Peter. "A dollar a throw."

Good luck continued to plague him although he knew that its attentions were not honorable! At the end of three quarters of an hour Peter was \$85 ahead.

"That's enough," he said with irritation.

"You're not going to quit now that you've got me in the hole," protested his opponent. "Aren't you going to give me a chance to get back?"

"You wouldn't have any chance. If we keep up I'm sure to win hundreds of dollars from you. Nobody can beat me just now. Look here if you don't believe me I'll give you a chance. I'll bet you a hundred dollars to ten on one roll."

"What's the matter with you, Neale?" asked the loser. "Are you soused?"

"Not yet," said Peter. "You're not taking any advantage of me. I tell you I know. I can't lose. Go ahead and roll."

"All right, if you want to throw money away it's not my fault."

He took the leather cup and rolled a pair of sixes. Peter slammed the dice down and four aces and a five danced out.

"No more," said Peter. "It's no use. That's \$95 you owe me."

"Would you mind if I held you up on that till next week? I'm sort of busted just now."

"No hurry, anytime'll do."

"Ninety-five, that's right, isn't it? Lend me \$5 that'll make it an even hundred. Easier to remember."

Peter gave him the five. He knew that even in his gambling triumphs there would be some catch. Wandering over to the bar alone he had two Martinis and then a Bronx but nothing seemed to happen. Looking at his watch he found that it was still only a little after three and he went up town to Fourteenth Street to a burlesque house. The show was called "Dave Shean's Joy Girls." When Peter came in Shean as a German comedian with a false stomach and a red wig had just volunteered to take the place of the bullfighter played by the straight man.

"Do you think you can kill the bull?" asked the straight man.

"I don't know dot I kills him," said Shean, "but I can throw him."

It annoyed Peter that everybody else in the theatre laughed so loudly.

"Yesterday," continued the real toreador, "I killed four bulls in the arena."

"I had him for breakfast."

"What are you talking about? What did you have for breakfast?"

"Farina."

Peter thought he would go but he waited in the hope that it might get better. Presently Shean and the tall man got into an argument. The serious one of the pair contended that Otto Schmaltz, the character played by Shean, did not have a whole shirt on his back.

"I bet you! I bet you!" shouted Schmaltz dancing about and patting the other man on the cheek. They came close to the footlights and placed huge piles of stage money side by side.

"Now," said the big man, "the bet is you haven't got a whole shirt on your back."

"Ches," replied Schmaltz.

"Why, you poor pusillanimous, transcendental, ossified little shrimp, you," said the big man. "Of course you haven't got a whole shirt on your back. Half of it is on the front."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he continued sneeringly and kicked the little man resoundingly while the crowd screamed.

Later Schmaltz bet with somebody else taking the other side of the contention, but again he lost because when it came time for the tag line he grew confused and shouted. "Why, you poor pussaliniment, tramps-on-a-dimple, oysterfied little shrimp, you, half of de back is on the front." And again the fortune of Schmaltz was swept away and again he was kicked.

Possibly the three cocktails had begun to have some effect after all or it may have been something else, but at any rate Peter was no longer merely bored by all these happenings. His sensation was just as unpleasant, but it was acute. Somehow or other the story of Schmaltz and the shirt had made him sad.

"Schmaltz is on me," he thought. "Schmaltz is everybody. Getting fooled and getting kicked." His musing became more vague. "Half of the back is on the front," seemed to take form as a tragic

complaint against life. He and Schmaltz they couldn't have it whole because "half of the back is on the front."

More disturbing moralizing was yet to come from the book of "Dave Shean's Joy Girls." The next entertainers were the Mulligan Brothers, female impersonators. One played the part of Clara and the other was Margie.

"The sailors on that ship was awful," began Clara. "The sailors on that ship was just awful. The poor girl was sinking there in the water and they wouldn't let her into the lifeboat. Every time she came up, Margie, one of the sailors hit her over the head with an oar."

Margie began to laugh stridently.

"What are you laughing for, Margie? Did you hear what I was telling you? I said every time the poor girl came up a sailor hit her over the head with an oar."

"Wasn't she the fool to come up," said Margie.

Peter knew that was not a joke. Here was his case against life summed up in a sentence. Idiots about him were laughing. Couldn't they see the bitterness of it. "Wasn't she the fool to come up!" That was his folly. He was going on taking the buffeting of the oars and for no reason. And yet he knew perfectly well that he would continue to come up no matter what blows fell about his head and shoulders. There was no use making any resolve to quit it all. Peter had no facility for suicide. He did not dare and he tried to justify himself in this unwillingness.

"After all," he thought, "it would be a pretty rotten trick to play on Kate. I promised her she could have Sunday off."

One piece of positive action he could and did take. He did not wait to gather any further pessimistic contributions to cosmic philosophy from "Dave Shean's Joy Girls," but walked out in the middle of Shean's drunken act. The comedian was pretending that the edge of the stage was the brass rail along a bar. Now he was swaying far over the orchestra pit and seemed about to fall into it. A woman in front of Peter screamed. Shean slowly straightened himself up and shook a reproving finger at the laughing audience. "My wife's bes' lil' woman in worl'," he said and did a hiccough. Still he seemed sober enough when Peter sitting on the aisle in the second row got up and started out of the theatre.

"Don't you like our show?" he called after him.

Peter flushed and made no answer.

"I guess I'm too natural," said Shean. "He can't stand it. You know how it is. He's a married man himself."

"Hey, Percy," he shouted after the retreating figure of Peter in a high falsetto, "you'll find a saloon right around the corner. Tell the bartender to let you have one on Otto Schmaltz."

Peter conscientiously walked past the saloon mentioned by the impertinent Shean and went into the next one three blocks farther on. He began to drink doggedly and consequently with slight effect. He was like a sleepless person. No blur came over the acuteness of his consciousness. He might just as well have tried counting sheep jumping over a fence. "Wasn't she the fool to come up!" recurred in his ears as if it had been a clock ticking late at night in a big silent house. Straight whiskey tasted abominably and returned no reward for his efforts. In the back room somebody was singing "Mother Machree" and cheating on the high notes. An idea for a newspaper paragraph came to Peter. Somebody had been conducting an agitation in the Bulletin against the use of "The Star Spangled Banner" as a national anthem on the ground that the air was originally that of a drinking song. "We ought to point out," thought Peter, "that it takes a few drinks to make anybody think he can get up to 'the rockets' red glare.'"

He wished his mind would stop pelting him with ideas. Thinking ought not to keep up when he hated it so. Leaving the bar, Peter took his drink over into the corner and sat down at a table. On the wall to his left hung a large colored picture labelled "Through the Keyhole." Peter looked at it and then moved his chair around so that he couldn't see it. He realized that he must get much drunker.

CHAPTER VIII

It was after ten when Peter came into Billy Gallivan's, the restaurant of the singing waiters. By now he could not see distinctly every sheep which jumped over the fence but he was still counting them. "I am drunk," he said to himself. "I am so drunk that nothing matters." But he knew that it was not so. Unfortunately the formula of Coué had not yet been given to the world and Peter lacked the prevision to say, "Drink by drink I am getting drunker and drunker and drunker."

And the singing waiters failed to inspire him with that reckless disregard for present, past and future which he desired. One of them, a fat man who had blonde hair and sang bass, eventually took Peter's order. He set the glass on the table and then moved away no more than a step to begin his song. "When I'm a-a-lone I'm lonely," he thundered in Peter's ear, "when I'm a-a-lone I'm bloo." Probably he was not as lonely as Peter. It made it worse because the song was so silly. "Every other girl and brother," the verse went on later, "has some pal just like a mother."

By this time the waiters were gathering from all over the long low room. Six of them stood shoulder to shoulder in front of Peter's table and sang together. "When I'm a-a-lone I'm lonely, when I'm a-a-lone I'm bloo." One of them went up high and quavered. Others went elsewhere. There was a voice for every level. It was part singing. And they swayed back and forth from one foot to another. The room swayed with them but it would not keep time. The rhythm of the room was much longer. Peter could feel it pound as if he had been a mile runner and the finish lay a hundred yards ahead of him. He still knew that he was a fool to come up.

After a long time the song stopped. The patrons of the place began to throw money out to the singers. With painstaking recklessness Peter fumbled in his pockets and found a silver dollar. It almost filled his hand as if it had been a baseball. He shook his head vehemently. What did he care if the count was two and three, he was not going to lay it over. The curve was the trick. The outside corner was the nervy spot to shoot for. Drawing back his arm he flung the dollar and it crashed against a table and bounded away. For a second the coin spun around and then it waddled in a long arc straight home to Peter's chair. He put his foot on it and picked it up. No, he was too sober not to know that a dollar was excessive.

These men were not very good waiters – any of them – but that did not make them artists. They were not very good singers either. Peter remembered that he had read in his little leather Bible, "You cannot serve God and mammon." That was the trouble. Art and utility should never meet. A fine tenor ought not to serve drinks and even indifferent singing seemed to spoil a man as a waiter. This theme had been in his mind before. A great dancer could not be a mother. Yes, that was the point where this speculation had begun. At last he found a quarter and threw that and he left a ten cent tip on the table.

"Hello, big boy," said a woman as he was going out. She was as blonde and as fat as the lonely waiter and much redder. Peter made no reply but went out and up the street to the Eldorado. Eldorado! That was a land of which the Spaniards had dreamed, a land of gold. They never found it. Perhaps that was just as well. Somebody in a tub had said, "Eldorado!" No, he didn't – that was "Eureka!"

At the Eldorado the waiters didn't sing at all. Special people did that. But mostly it was just dancing. The floor was filled with couples. A long flight of steps led down to the tables. At the foot of the steps a girl sat alone. She was a young girl and pretty but hard and brazen enough. And she didn't call him, "Dearie." She merely said, "Buy me a drink."

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