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I arrived home after a best-forgotten day at the track to the all too familiar clack of a typewriter.

“Hello, dear.” As usual, she spoke without lifting her eyes from the page before her. “Any luck?”

“Luck?” Good God, what did she know? Was it the bracing scent of the turf? I checked my shoes. Nothing.

“You said you hoped to finally get that check today. The Amalgamated Which-Its of Podunk.”

“Oh. Bad news there. The Amalgamated Which-Its of Podunk are in receivership.”

There was an abrupt halt to the clatter. She looked over at me with concern. Emmie never nags, but she does sometimes look at me with concern. The effect is such that I wish she’d take up nagging. I’d wager if Xanthippe had mastered the technique, she might have shamed Socrates into some occupation more befitting a man with a family, and generations of indifferent students would have been spared having to feign an understanding of whatever it was he was trying to get at.

But it was no use stalling with ruminations on the Western philosophic tradition—Emmie was still looking at me with concern.

While lunching in O’Brien’s saloon I had anticipated this precise scenario. That was three shots and a beer chaser after I’d learned the fate of the Amalgamated Which-Its of Podunk and immediately before an acquaintance I knew only as Snide Sam proposed an excursion to the pony races at his expense. Needless to say, I’m not the sort of naïf who falls prey to fellows whose names are preceded by adjectives—not even with three shots and a beer chaser under my belt. Sensing this, Sam bought me a half dozen shots more.

By the time we boarded the train out to Jamaica—the Queens County Jockey Club being that week’s host—the scenario of my homecoming had been elaborated. Now when Emmie shot me the concerned look, I merely smiled, then plopped my winnings on the table beside her. In my most ambitious version, they totaled fifteen hundred dollars. But that was before we met the two girls.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked.

Her look changed from one of concern to something combining vague amusement with mild derision. This is Emmie’s trademark, and I’d grown to find it comforting. Which ought to give you some idea of her repertoire.

“I’ll see if I can scrape another round of gristle off last Sunday’s ham.”

“Sounds delightful. Any mail?”

“A second notice from the grocer, a third from the butcher, and I believe that intriguing mauve envelope is a shut-off notice from the telephone company.”

She went into the kitchen and I picked up the daily dunning from the table. I’d had too

Protestant an upbringing to simply toss unpleasantness in the trash, but I *had* taken up Emmie's habit of placing it out of sight. We kept a pile of scrap paper beside the telephone for jotting messages, and I flipped over the missives from the butcher and grocer and added them to the stack. In doing so, I overturned the topmost piece there. It was a short letter from Emmie's mother begging her to come for a visit. There were three more similar letters below that, all dated within the last few weeks and of increasing urgency.

I replaced these and moved on to the vase of flowers Emmie kept on a small table by the door. It occurred to me that the intriguing mauve envelope would look especially intriguing beneath the white porcelain. That space, however, was already occupied by an intriguing blue telegram from her mother dated that very day. It was short, but to the point:

For God's sake, Emmie! Respond!

I replaced it with the mauve envelope and carried it into the kitchen.

"Your mother seems to be hinting at something."

"She's just having trouble with the cousins again."

A widowed uncle of Emmie's had died three years before and his three children—twin boy and girl, now about nineteen, and a younger boy, maybe twelve—had gone to live with Emmie's mother at her home in Northampton.

"What's the little truant up to now?"

"It's not Pluribus this time, or at least not him primarily. It's Hal and Gloria."

Emmie's uncle had been born during the Civil War, and the patriotic euphoria that ensued had made a deep and lasting impression. The girl, Gloria, was first to emerge from the womb and the welcome boy that followed was—in keeping with the theme—dubbed Hallelujah. When seven years later a second boy came along, he naturally was christened Pluribus. Actually, E. Pluribus, with the "E" not standing for anything, so far as anyone knew. In Emmie's family, none of this passes as remarkable.

"I thought they were both working?"

"They are. It's their romantic entanglements. It seems Hal has set his sights on a cook some years his senior."

"What's that to your mother? Ben Franklin swore by it."

"Swore by what?"

"The advisability of taking an older lover."

"Well, Mother is in the opposing camp. She says the cook has given absolutely no encouragement. And what's worse, his folly has made him an object of amusement for the other boys, and that in turn has led to several violent altercations."

"Ben never mentioned violent altercations. What's the trouble with Gloria?"

"With her, it's just the opposite. Mother says she's far *too* friendly with the young men, and fears she may be dispensing her favors indiscriminately."

“Which favors specifically?”

“Mother doesn’t itemize. But working in a hotel as Gloria does, she doesn’t lack for opportunity. And, of course, Pluribus is still skipping school.”

“Sounds as if they have poor Mother surrounded. But you aren’t anxious to enter the fray?”

“Harry, you know full well I’m in the middle of *The Circensiad*, which may be my most original work.”

I knew little about the work in question, but Emmie described it as a melding of the best elements of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and those of the children’s book *Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with a Circus*. It was due to this stunning disregard for salability that Emmie’s earnings as a writer had yet to reach, after four years, double digits.

She now began what promised to be a stinging coda: “Besides, with money so tight and you...”

In mid-sentence, she stopped, sniffed the air, and proceeded to change the subject.

“Harry, are you wearing scent?”

“What?”

“Smells French.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Emmie.”

We sat down to our warmed-over gristle and by unspoken agreement let both matters drop. But Fate had other plans.

Complex plans, as it happens. Though convoluted might be closer to the mark. Or maybe tortuous. In fact, plans so lacking in any kind of organizing principle it’s taking a liberty to call them plans at all. I suppose it would be more accurate to call them the whims of a capricious deity. Just the sort of things Aeneas et al. faced on a near-daily basis. But where they were heroes of the Golden Age, I was an out of work insurance investigator living in Brooklyn and decidedly ill-equipped for taking on deities—capricious or otherwise.

I wonder if I’ve entered into this the right way. I can’t help but think I’ve taken things a bit fast, leaving you unprepared for the ludicrous saga which follows. Let me try another tack.

There are, I think it’s fair to say, two sorts of people: those who’ve attended a literary dinner where the host drowns in his own blancmange, and those not so unlucky. Now, even if we broaden the distinction, say to those who’ve attended a literary dinner where the *ostensible* host *appears* to have drowned in his blancmange, well, there’s no disputing that this group must be infinitesimally small. Speaking as an insurance man, though not an actual actuary, I would guess one’s odds of attending such a fête are less than one in three million—and for a thirty-year-old American male with no known cultural aspirations, one in three hundred million.

Unless, that is, he has gotten himself entangled with someone like Emmie. You see, Emmie is one of Mother Nature’s problem children, those unpredictable creatures who make for amusing anecdotes, but problematical spouses. Put simply, within Emmie’s radius of influence, laws of probability are flouted with abandon, and actuarial tables pass into nothingness.

It may sound as if I'm complaining, but on this particular evening I felt a nostalgic longing for Emmie's eccentric habits. They'd been in abeyance since two years before, when her literary ambitions had evolved into something of an obsession. From that point on, life had become both duller and financially more precarious.

That's not to say that our current pecuniary predicament was unique in the annals of our marriage. A graph charting the family income over the previous five years would closely resemble the swells and dips of an ocean in turmoil. One moment we're living high, traveling to Europe on a well-appointed steam yacht. A week later we're in a French resort town wondering how we'll pay the hotel bill and make passage home.

Part of the problem is the nature of my business. I investigate insurance fraud cases and am usually paid by commission, say 15% of the recovery. If it's a large case, and all goes well, I can make a tidy sum. If, on the other hand, the case goes poorly, or the client goes into receivership before mailing my check, I come out with nothing to show for my efforts but the experience. And that's not a medium of exchange most tradesmen are willing to accept, having vaults of it themselves.

There had been a time when Emmie brought in a sizable income of her own. Not through her writing, but via her lucky deck of cards. By the time of our marriage, Emmie had developed an affection, but no special talent, for gambling. What she did have a talent for was what the uncharitable call duplicity, and the charitable, the art of deception.

It was Emmie's double-dealing at bridge with the well-heeled matrons of Brooklyn which would have financed our sojourn in France, had she not lost it all to a more skilled cheat on the way over. But she learned from that experience, and, more often than not, Emmie's gifts with a cold deck offered something of a buffer when things were tight. Until, that is, her writing eclipsed all else.

The day following our dinner of gristle began on a promising note: a suspicious conflagration had rendered an idle—but well-insured—factory into ash and a potentially fat fee. By the time I reached the scene, the arsonist had confessed—and, sadly, implicated the owner, rendering both the policy and the fat fee moot. It's an unfortunate facet of my business that my success depends on the competence of amateur crooks. I sometimes wonder if it wouldn't improve my lot if I were to publish a line of helpful pamphlets, such as *How to Torch a Building*, *How to Fake Your Own Death*, *How to Poison a Spouse*, and *How to Burgle Your Own Home*.

In fact, I went to my office and spent the remainder of the day doing nothing so productive. I stared out the window and heaped a scorn born of envy on all the passersby who seemed to be in a good mood. It cheered me some, but they were unmoved.

That evening, I arrived home to find the janitor on the stoop leaning on a broom. As a broom leaner, he was an artiste, but on this occasion he had taken the thing to a whole new level: simultaneous with the broom leaning, he held out a slip of blue paper.

"Come fer yer missus," he told me. "Anutter wire from 'er poor mama. Want me ta read it?"

It was generally taken as a given that anything lacking an official wax seal was fair game for Mr. Bagley.

“Sure—what’s it say?”

“Crisis! Da end is nigh! That’s it.”

I took it and turned to go up the steps. But with uncharacteristic energy, the janitor stretched out an arm and stopped me.

“Guess you can’t be bothered with a poor ol’ widow. You got yer own problems.”

“What would you know about my problems?”

“One of ’em come by, jus’ a while ago.”

“Who came by?”

“Big ugly guy. Widt a cauliflower ear, an’ a split lip dat ain’t healed right.”

“No one I know. Did he give a name?”

“Said Sam sent him, ’bout da five C-notes you owe ’im.”

“Five? What’d you tell him?”

“I told ’im, ain’t no way you can come up widt five C-notes.”

“What would you know about that?”

“Only what I hear.”

“And read. What else did he say?”

“He says he guessed ya could if ya try hard enough.”

As I proceeded up the steps, he called after me.

“Don’ forget, rent’s due Monday.”

Upstairs, I found Emmie on the phone.

“It’s someone named Sam, for you,” she said, handing it over. “I’ll be starting dinner.... How do you like your ham bone?”

“Naked, and steaming hot. Like my women.”

“Why don’t I spritz it with something Parisian and leave you two alone for the evening?”

I held the phone and waited for her to go into the kitchen. If you’re thinking Emmie had evinced some form of jealousy, let me correct you. I’ve tried everything short of adultery to rouse the green-eyed monster, but it’s never so much as lifted an eyelid.

I put the phone to my ear.

“Say, Sam, good to hear from you. That was quite a day we had, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. An’ the night after.”

“I missed that. What happened the night after?”

“Them dames you hooked me up with took me for three hundred bucks.”

“Did they? Little vixens. Say, while we’re on the subject, I don’t suppose you know what happened to my watch?”

“What watch?”

“My watch. Gold, with an inscription from the Countess de la Salsiccia. It held some sentimental value....”

“To hell with your damn watch. I’m looking to get compensated for the dough your pals relieved me of.”

“Certainly you aren’t accusing...”

“No games. You set me up and now you’ll pay me back. Three hundred. Plus the hundred I lent you.”

“Not that I’m admitting culpability, but that makes only four hundred.”

“Another C in interest. And if I don’t get it by Monday, it will be a hundred more. You got that?”

The irony was that I had assumed the two French girls were friends of *his*. I considered pointing this out, but fellows called Snide tend to have a low tolerance for irony. I was still mulling my response when the phone went dead. Apparently the telephone company’s patience ran shorter than Sam’s.

I brought Emmie’s telegram into the kitchen and handed it to her.

“It seems the end is nigh,” I said.

“Hmm. Mother must be reading the Sunday paper.”

“I suspect it’s more serious than that. Maybe we should go up there.”

“We? You’d be willing to come along?”

“They are family, Emmie.”

She looked at me warily. “Why do I get the sense there may be some connection between this sudden tug of familial obligation and the phone call from that ill-mannered Sam? Or is it that French scent you were wearing yesterday? ...Ah, I see now. It’s all one.”

Among the things I like least about Emmie is how transparent she finds me.

“Well,” she went on, “it so happens, I’ve decided to go myself. I’ve already bought my ticket for tomorrow.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Mother’s pleading, of course.”

One of the other things I like least about Emmie is how impenetrable I find her. There was some chance she was telling the truth, but I thought it a slim one. No, something else had changed her mind. And since she hadn’t divulged what it was, I surmised it must be something of a sinister nature.

That evening, when she went back to her typing, I pretended to be looking for a book and used this subterfuge to perform a search of the apartment, seeking evidence of some communication which would explain Emmie’s sudden change of heart.

Eureka! There, beneath a sheaf of typewritten manuscript, lay hidden an envelope from one Margaret Cable of Northampton, Massachusetts—and postmarked the day before!

“Harry, why in God’s name are you rifling my papers?”

“Rifling your papers? Don’t be absurd. I was looking for that book...”

“What book? When did you take up reading?”

“I resent that, Emmie. You know what book, George Ade’s latest.”

“I gave that to you for Christmas. You’ve been reading that hundred pages of doggerel for four months.”

“There’s a lot to take in. He presents a very nuanced case. *True Bills* is not a book to be read in a day. And it’s at least a hundred and fifty pages.”

The look she presented me now was light on the vague amusement—but the derision had quite ably taken up the slack. Forced to retreat, I abandoned the incriminating letter unexamined.

The next day, Sunday, struck me as an auspicious one for travel. Especially since it preceded Monday, which had taken on a troubling, ill-omened sort of cast. I might have preferred another destination, but no doubt the respite would do me good. What sort of reception would await me on our return I left unconsidered. All I could do was hope for the best. And since hoping for the best probably wouldn’t by itself fill my days, I added a second item to the agenda: derailing Emmie’s literary career. Of course, since her literary career had never been railed to begin with, it really came down to setting her free of her delusions. I knew there’d be some unpleasantness about it, but, in time, I felt sure she’d thank me.

On the way out of the apartment, an image of the gorilla with the cauliflower ear passed before me. I returned to the bedroom and picked up the lucky deck which Emmie had neglected to pack.

~~ *end of sample* ~~

<http://www.harryreesemysteries.com/paradise/>