ppreciate it, sir," he said, "if they were able to taste it. But they can't."

"What the heck d'you mean, they can't taste it?"

"I believe, sir, that you have instructed Monsieur Estragon to put liberal q uantities of vinegar in the salad-dressing."

"What's wrong with that? I like vinegar."

"Vinegar," the butler said, "is the enemy of wine. It destroys the palate. The dressing should be made of pure olive oil and a little lemon juice. Nothi ng else."

"Hogwash!" said Mr Cleaver.

"As you wish, sir."

"I'll say it again, Tibbs. You're talking hogwash. The vinegar don't spoil my palate one bit."

"You are very fortunate, sir," the butler murmured, backing out of the ro om.

That night at dinner, the host began to mock his butler in front of the gue sts. "Mister Tibbs," he said, "has been trying to tell me I can't taste my wine if I put vinegar in the salad-dressing. Right, Tibbs?"

"Yes, sir," Tibbs replied gravely.

"And I told him hogwash. Didn't I, Tibbs?"

"Yes, sir."

"This wine," Mr Cleaver went on, raising his glass, "tastes to me exactly like a Ch‰teau Lafite '45, and what's more it is a Ch‰teau Lafite '45."

Tibbs, the butler, stood very still and erect near the sideboard, his face pal e. "If you'll forgive me, sir," he said, "that is not a Lafite '45."

Mr Cleaver swung round in his chair and stared at the butler. "What the h eck d'you mean," he said. "There's the empty bottles beside you to prove it!"

These great clarets, being old and full of sediment, were always decante d by Tibbs before dinner. They were served in cut-glass decanters, while the empty bottles, as is the custom, were placed on the sideboard. Right now, t wo empty bottles of Lafite '45 were standing on the sideboard for all to see.

"The wine you are drinking, sir," the butler said quietly, "happens to be that cheap and rather odious Spanish red."

Mr Cleaver looked at the wine in his glass, then at the butler. The blood was coming to his face now, his skin was turning scarlet. "You're lying, Tib bs!" he said.

"No sir, I'm not lying," the butler said. "As a matter of fact, I have nev er served you any other wine but Spanish red since I've been here. It seemed t o suit you very well."

"I don't believe him!" Mr Cleaver cried out to his guests. "The man's gon e mad."

"Great wines," the butler said, "should be treated with reverence. It is

bad enough to destroy the palate with three or four cocktails before dinner, as you people do, but when you slosh vinegar over your food into the bargain, then you might just as well be drinking dishwater."

Ten outraged faces around the table stared at the butler. He had caught them off balance. They were speechless.

"This," the butler said, reaching out and touching one of the empty bott les lovingly with his fingers, "this is the last of the forty-fives. The twe nty-nines have already been finished. But they were glorious wines. Monsieur Estragon and I enjoyed them immensely."

The butler bowed and walked quite slowly from the room. He crossed the hail and went out of the front door of the house into the street where Mons ieur Estragon was already loading their suitcases into the boot of the smal l car which they owned together.

Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life

MY cow started bulling at dawn and the noise can drive you crazy if the cow shed is right under your window. So I got dressed early and phoned Claud at the filling-station to ask if he'd give me a hand to lead her down the ste ep hill and across the road over to Rummins's farm to have her serviced by Rummins's famous bull.

Claud arrived five minutes later and we tied a rope around the cow's nec k and set off down the lane on this cool September morning. There were high hedges on either side of the lane and the hazel bushes had clusters of big r ipe nuts all over them.

"You ever seen Rummins do a mating?" Claud asked me.

I told him I had never seen anyone do an official mating between a bull a nd a cow.

"Rummins does it special," Claud said. "There's nobody in the world do es a mating the way Rummins does it."

"What's so special about it?"

"You got a treat coming to you," Claud said.

"So has the cow," I said.

"If the rest of the world knew about what Rummins does at a mating," Cl aud said, "he'd be world famous. It would change the whole science of dairy -farming all over the world."

"Why doesn't he tell them then?" I asked.

"I doubt he's ever even thought about it," Claud said. "Rummins isn't one to bother his head about things like that. He's got the best dairy-herd for miles around and that's all he cares about. He doesn't want the newspapers sw

arming all over his place asking questions, which is exactly what would happe n if it ever got out."

"Why don't you tell me about it," I said.

We walked on in silence for a while, the cow pulling ahead.

"I'm surprised Rummins said yes to lending you his bull," Claud said. "I 've never known him do that before."

At the bottom of the lane we crossed the Aylesbury road and climbed up the hill on the other side of the valley towards the farm. The cow knew the re was a bull up there somewhere and she was pulling harder than ever on th e rope. We had to trot to keep up with her.

There were no gates at the farm entrance, just a wide gap and a cobbled yard beyond. Rummins, carrying a pail of milk across the yard, saw us comi ng. He set the pail down slowly and came over to meet us. "She's ready then , is she?" he said.

"Been yelling her head off," I said.

Rummins walked around my cow, examining her carefully. He was a short m an, built squat and broad like a frog. He had a wide frog mouth and broken teeth and shifty eyes, but over the years I had grown to respect him for hi s wisdom and the sharpness of his mind. "All right then," he said. "What is it you want, a heifer calf or a bull?"

"Can I choose?"

"Of course you can choose."

"Then I'll have a heifer," I said, keeping a straight face. "We want milk no t beef."

"Hey, Bert!" Rummins called out. "Come and give us a hand!"

Bert emerged from the cowsheds. He was Rummins's youngest son, a tall boneless boy with a runny nose and something wrong with one eye. The eye w as pale and misty-grey all over, like a boiled fish eye, and it moved quit e independently from the other eye. "Get another rope," Rummins said.

Bert fetched a rope and looped it around my cow's neck so that she now had two ropes holding her, my own and Bert's. "He wants a heifer," Rummins said. "Face her into the sun."

"Into the sun?" I said. "There isn't any sun."

"There's always sun," Rummins said. "Them bloody clouds don't make no difference. Come on now. Get a jerk on, Bert. Bring her round. Sun's over there."

With Bert holding one rope and Claud and me holding the other, we mano euvred the cow round until her head was facing directly towards the place in the sky where the sun was hidden behind the clouds.

"I told you it was different," Claud whispered. "You're going to see some thing soon you've never seen in your life before."

"Hold her steady now!" Rummins ordered. "Don't let her jump round!" Then

he hurried over to a shed in the far corner of the yard and brought out the bull. He was an enormous beast, a black-and-white Friesian, with short legs and a body like a ten-ton truck. Rummins was leading it by a chain attached to a steel ring through the bull's nose.

"Look at them bangers on him," Claud said. "I'll bet you've never seen a b ull with bangers like that before."

"Tremendous," I said. They were like a couple of cantaloupe melons in a carrier bag and they were almost dragging on the ground as the bull waddle d forward.

"You better stand back and leave the rope to me," Claud said. "You get r ight out of the way." I was happy to comply.

The bull approached my cow slowly, staring at her with dangerous white eyes. Then he started snorting and pawing the ground with one foreleg.

"Hang on tight!" Rummins shouted to Bert and Claud. They were leaning b ack against their respective ropes, holding them very taut and at right ang les to the cow.

"Come on, boy," Rummins whispered softly to the bull. "Go to it, lad."

With surprising agility the bull heaved his front part up on to the cow's back and I caught a glimpse of a long scarlet penis, as thin as a rapier and just as stiff, and then it was inside the cow and the cow staggered and the bull heaved and snorted and in thirty seconds it was all over. The bull climb ed down again slowly and stood there looking somewhat pleased with himself.

"Some bulls don't know where to put it," Rummins said. "But mine does. Mine could thread a needle with that dick of his."

"Wonderful," I said. "A bull's eye."

"That's exactly where the word come from," Rummins said. "A bull's eye. Come on, lad," he said to the bull. "You've had your lot for today." He le d the bull back to the shed and shut him in and when he returned I thanked him, and then I asked him if he really believed that facing the cow into th e sun during the mating would produce a female calf.

"Don't be so damn silly," he said. "Of course I believe it. Facts is facts."

"What do you mean facts is facts?"

"I mean what I say, mister. It's certainty. That's right, ain't it Bert?"

"And if you face her away from the sun does it get you a male?"

"Every single time," Rummins said. I smiled and he saw it. "You don't b elieve me, do you?"

"Not really," I said.

"Come with me," he said. "And when you see what I'm going to show you, you'll bloody well have to believe me. You two stay here and watch that c ow; he said to Claud and Bert. Then he led me into the farmhouse. The room we went into was dark and small and dirty. From a drawer in the sideboard he produced a whole stack of thin exercise books. They were the kind chil

dren use at school. "These is calving books," he announced. "And in here i s a record of every mating that's ever been done on this farm since I firs t started thirty-two years ago."

He opened a book at random and allowed me to look. There were four columns on each page: COW'S NAME, DATE OF MATING, DATE OF B IRTH, SEX OF CALF.

I glanced down the sex column. Heifer, it said. Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Hei fer, Heifer.

"We don't want no bull calves here," Rummins said. "Bull calves is a dead loss on a dairy farm."

I turned over a page. Heifer, it said. Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer, Heifer.

"Hey," I said, "here's a bull calf."

"That's quite right," Rummins said. "Now take a look at what I wrote opp osite that one at the time of the mating." I glanced at column two. Cow jump ed round, it said.

"Some of them gets fractious and you can't hold 'em steady," Rummins said . "So they finish up facing the other way. That's the only time I ever get a bull."

"This is fantastic," I said, leafing through the book.

"Of course it's fantastic," Rummins said. "It's one of the most fantastic things in the whole world. Do you actually know what I average on this farm? I average ninety-eight per cent heifers year in year out! Check it for yours elf. Go on and check it. I'm not stopping you."

"I'd like very much to check it," I said. "May I sit down?"

"Help yourself," Rummins said. "I've got work to do." I found a pencil and paper and I proceeded to go through each one of the thirty-two little b ooks with great care. There was one book for each year, from 1915 to 1946. There were approximately eighty calves a year born on the farm, and my fina l results over the thirty-two-year period were as follows: Heifer calves 2, 516 Bull calves 56 Total calves born, including stillborn 2,572 I went outs ide to look for Rummins. Claud had disappeared. He'd probably taken my cow home. I found Rummins in the dairy pouring milk into the separator. "Haven' t you ever told anyone about this?" I asked him.

"Never have," he said.

"Why not?"

"I reckon it ain't nobody else's business."

"But my dear man, this could transform the entire milk industry the world over."

"It might," he said. "It might easily do that. It wouldn't do the beef busin ess no harm either if they could get bulls every time."

"How did you hear about it in the first place?"

"My old dad told me," Rummins said. "When I were about eighteen, my old da d said to me, 'I'll tell you a secret,' he said, 'that'll make you rich.' And he told me this."

"Has it made you rich?"

"I ain't done too bad for myself, have I?" he said.

"But did your father offer any sort of explanation as to why it works?" I a sked.

Rummins explored the inner rim of one nostril with the end of his thum b, holding the noseflap between thumb and forefinger as he did so. "A very clever man, my old dad was," he said. "Very clever indeed. Of course he t old me how it works."

"How?"

"He explained to me that a cow don't have nothing to do with deciding the sex of the calf," Rummins said. All a cow's got is an egg. It's the bull dec ides what the sex is going to be. The sperm of the bull."

"Go on," I said.

"According to my old dad, a bull has two different kinds of sperm, fem ale sperm and male sperm. You follow me so far?"

"Yes," I said. "Keep going."

"So when the old bull shoots off his sperm into the cow, a sort of swimm ing race takes place between the male and the female sperm to see which one can reach the egg first. If the female sperm wins, you get a heifer."

"But what's the sun got to do with it?" I asked.

"I'm coming to that," he said, "so listen carefully. When an animal is st anding on all fours like a cow, and when you face her head into the sun, then the sperm has also got to travel directly into the sun to reach the egg. Swi tch the cow around and they'll be travelling away from the sun."

"So what you're saying," I said, "is that the sun exerts a pull of some sort on the female sperm and makes them swim faster than the male sperm."

"Exactly!" cried Rummins. "That's exactly it! It exerts a pull! It drag s them forward! That's why they always win! And if you turn the cow round t he other way, it's pulling them backwards and the male sperm wins instead."

"It's an interesting theory," I said. "But it hardly seems likely that the sun, which is millions of miles away, could exert a pull on a bunch of sperma tozoa inside a cow."

"You're talking rubbish!" cried Rummins. "Absolute and utter rubbish! D on't the moon exert a pull on the bloody tides of the ocean to make 'em hig h and low? Of course it does! So why shouldn't the sun exert a pull on the female sperm?"

"I see your point."

Suddenly Rummins seemed to have had enough. "You'll have a heifer calf for sure," he said, turning away. "Don't you worry about that."

"Mr Rummins," I said.

"What?"

"Is there any reason why this shouldn't work with humans as well?"

"Of course it'll work with humans," he said. "Just so long as you remembe r everything's got to be pointed in the right direction. A cow ain't lying do wn you know. It's standing on all fours."

"I see what you mean."

"And it ain't no good doing it at night either," he said, "because the sun i s shielded behind the earth and it can't influence anything."

"That's true," I said, "but have you any sort of proof it works with human s?"

Rummins laid his head to one side and gave me another of his long sly bro ken-toothed grins. "I've got four boys of my own, ain't I?" he said.

"So you have."

"Ruddy girls ain't no use to me around here," he said. "Boys is what you want on a farm and I've got four of 'em, right?"

"Right," I said, "you're absolutely right."

The Bookseller

IF, in those days, you walked up from Trafalgar Square into Charing C ross Road, you would come in a few minutes to a shop on the right-han d side that had above the window the words WILLIAM BUGGAGE--RARE BOOK S.

If you peered through the window itself you would see that the walls we re lined with books from floor to ceiling, and if you then pushed open the door and went in, you would immediately be assailed by that subtle odour of old cardboard and tea leaves that pervades the interiors of every second-h and bookshop in London. Nearly always, you would find two or three customer s in there, silent shadowy figures in overcoats and trilby hats rummaging a mong the sets of Jane Austen and Trollope and Dickens and George Eliot, hop ing to find a first edition.

No shop-keeper ever seemed to be hovering around to keep an eye on the customers, and if somebody actually wanted to pay for a book instead of p inching it and walking out, then he or she would have to push through a do or at the back of the shop on which it said OFFICE--PAY HERE. If you went into the office you would find both Mr William Buggage and his assistant, Miss Muriel Tottle, seated at their respective desks and very much preoccu pied. Mr Buggage would be sitting behind a valuable eighteenth-century mah ogany partners-desk, and Miss Tottle, a few feet away, would be using a so

mewhat smaller but no less elegant piece of furniture, a Regency writing-t able with a top of faded green leather. On Mr Buggage's desk there would i nvariably be one copy of the day's London Times, as well as The Daily Tele graph, The Manchester Guardian, The Western Mail, and The Glasgow Herald. There would also be a current edition of Who's Who close at hand, fat and red and well thumbed. Miss Tottle's writing-table would have on it an elec tric typewriter and a plain but very nice open box containing notepaper an d envelopes, as well as a quantity of paper-clips and staplers and other s ecretarial paraphernalia.

Now and again, but not very often, a customer would enter the office f rom the shop and would hand his chosen volume to Miss Tottle, who checked the price written in pencil on the fly-leaf and accepted the money, giving change when necessary from somewhere in the left-hand drawer of her writi ng-table. Mr Buggage never bothered even to glance up at those who came in and went out, and if one of them asked a question, it would be Miss Tottl e who answered it.

Neither Mr Buggage nor Miss Tottle appeared to be in the least concerne d about what went on in the main shop. In point of fact, Mr Buggage took th e view that if someone was going to steal a book, then good luck to him. He knew very well that there was not a single valuable first edition out ther e on the shelves. There might be a moderately rare volume of Galsworthy or an early Waugh that had come in with a job lot bought at auction, and there were certainly some good sets of Boswell and Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson and the rest, often very nicely bound in half or even whole calf . But those were not really the sort of things you could slip into your ove rcoat pocket. Even if a villain did walk out with half a dozen volumes, Mr Buggage wasn't going to lose any sleep over it. Why should he when he knew that the shop itself earned less money in a whole year than the backroom bu siness grossed in a couple of days. It was what went on in the back room th at counted.

One morning in February when the weather was foul and sleet was slant ing white and wet on to the window-panes of the office, Mr Buggage and Mi ss Tottle were in their respective places as usual and each was engrossed , one might even say fascinated, by his and her own work. Mr Buggage, wit h a gold Parker pen poised above a note-pad, was reading The Times and jo tting things down as he went along. Every now and again, he would refer t o Who's Who and make more jottings.

Miss Tottle, who had been opening the mail, was now examining some ch eques and adding up totals.

"Three today," she said.

"What's it come to?" Mr Buggage asked, not looking up.

"One thousand six hundred," Miss Tottle said. Mr Buggage said, "I don't

suppose we've "eard anything yet from that bishop's 'ouse in Chester, 'ave w e?"

"A bishop lives in a palace, Billy, not a house," Miss Tottle said.

"I don't give a sod where 'ee lives," Mr Buggage said. "But I get just a l ittle bit uneasy when there's no quick answer from somebody like that."

"As a matter of fact, the reply came this morning," Miss Tottle said.

"Coughed up all right?"

"The full amount."

"That's a relief," Mr Buggage said. "We never done a bishop before and I' m not sure it was any too clever."

"The cheque came from some solicitors."

Mr Buggage looked up sharply. "Was there a letter?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Read it."

Miss Tottle found the letter and began to read: 'Dear Sir, With reference to your communication of the 4th Instant, we enclose herewith a cheque for £ 537 in full settlement. Yours faithfully, Smithson, Briggs and Ellis.' Miss T ottle paused. "That seems all right, doesn't it?"

"It's all right this time," Mr Buggage said. "But we don't want no more sol icitors and let's not 'ave any more bishops either."

"I agree about bishops," Miss Tottle said. "But you're not suddenly ruling out earls and lords and all that lot, I hope?"

"Lords is fine," Mr Buggage said. "We never 'ad no trouble with lords. N or earls either. And didn't we do a duke once?"

"The Duke of Dorset," Miss Tottle said. "Did him last year. Over a thous and quid."

"Very nice," Mr Buggage said. "I remember selectin'

'im myself straight off the front page." He stopped talking while he prised a bit of food out from between two front teeth with the nail of his little finge r. "What I says is this," he went on. "The bigger the title, the bigger the twit . In fact, anyone's got a title on 'is name is almost certain to be a twit."

"Now that's not quite true, Billy," Miss Tottle said. "Some people are giv en titles because they've done absolutely brilliant things, like inventing pen icillin or climbing Mount Everest."

"I'm talking about in'erited titles," Mr Buggage said. "Anyone gets born with a title, it's odds-on 'ee's a twit."

"You're right there," Miss Tottle said. "We've never had the slightest trou ble with the aristocracy."

Mr Buggage leaned back in his chair and gazed solemnly at Miss Tottle. "You know what?" he said. "One of these days we might even 'ave a crack a t royalty."

"Ooh, I'd love it," Miss Tottle said. "Sock them for a fortune."

Mr Buggage continued to gaze at Miss Tottle's profile, and as he did so, a slightly lascivious glint crept into his eye. One is forced to admit that Miss Tottle's appearance, when judged by the highest standards, was disappointing. To tell the truth when judged by any standards, it was still disappointing. Her face was long and horsey and her teeth, which were also rather long, had a sulphurous tinge about them. So did her skin. The best you could say about her was that she had a generous bosom, but even that had its faults. It was the kind that makes a single long tightly bound bulge from one side of the chest to the other, and at first glance one got the impression that there were not two individual breasts growing out of her body but simply one big long loaf of bread.

Then again, Mr Buggage himself was in no position to be overly finicky. When one saw him for the first time, the word that sprang instantly to mind was 'grubby'. He was squat, paunchy, bald and flaccid, and so far as his face was concerned, one could only make a guess at what it looked like because not much of it was visible to the eye. The major part was covered over by an immense thicket of black, bushy, slightly curly hair, a fashion, one fears, that is all too common these days, a foolish practice and incidentally a rather dirty habit. Why so many males wish to conceal their facial characteristics is beyond the comprehension of us ordinary mortals. One must presume that if it were possible for these people also to grow hair all over their noses and cheeks and eyes, then they would do so, ending up with no visible face at all but only an obscene and rather gamey ball of hair. The only possible conclusion one can arrive at when looking at one of these bearded males is that the vegetation is a kind of smoke-screen and is cultivated in order to conceal something unsightly or unsavoury.

This was almost certainly true in Mr Buggage's case, and it was therefore fortunate for all of us, and especially for Miss Tottle, that the beard was there. Mr Buggage continued to gaze wistfully at his assistant. Then he said, "Now pet, why don't you 'urry up and get them cheques in the post because after you've done that I've got a little proposal to put to you."

Miss Tottle looked back over her shoulder at the speaker and gave him a smirk that showed the cutting edges of her sulphur teeth. Whenever he called her 'pet', it was a sure sign that feelings of a carnal nature were beginning to stir within Mr Buggage's breast, and in other parts as well.

"Tell it to me now, lover," she said.

"You get them cheques done first," he said. He could be very commanding at times, and Miss Tottle thought it was wonderful.

Miss Tottle now began what she called her Daily Audit. This involved examining all of Mr Buggage's bank accounts and all of her own and then deciding into which of them the latest cheques should be paid. Mr Buggage, you see, at this particular moment, had exactly sixty-six different accounts