

pushing this toe up or down."

"Up," he had said.

"And now?"

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

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

"Did I get them all right, doctor?"

"You did very well."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you doing now?"

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

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

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

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

"Hot." „ And this?"

"Cold."

"And this?"

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

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

But that was a year ago.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you staring at?"

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

"Robert, what were you staring at?"

"Nothing,"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you going my way?" he said.

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

He stopped and turned again.

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

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

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

Someone trying to be clever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Nothing, dear."

"You woke me up." m sorry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Edna!" he shouted. "Edna!"

"Oh go to hell."

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

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

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

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

"Is that you, Robert?"

He made no move, no sound.

"Robert, are you there?"

The voice was strange and rather unpleasant to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where's Edna?"

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

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

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

"Where did she go?"

"She didn't say."

"And who are you?"

"I'm just a friend of hers."

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman didn't answer.

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

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

"Awful cruel little bitch, Edna."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I certainly don't."

"Turn your head and let me look."

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

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

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

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

## My Lady Love, My Dove

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

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

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

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

I told her politely that I didn't know.

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

"No dear, all right."

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

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

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

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

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

Somewhere around six o'clock, I guessed.

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

"Well.

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

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

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

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

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

"Well, of course, I.

"Don't be a fool, Arthur."

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

"So is the butcher."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes?"

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

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

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

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

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

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



"What?"

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

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

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

"What sort of fun?"

"With the Snapes?"

"Who are the Snapes?"

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

"Well?"

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

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

"Why shouldn't we?"

"What do you want to do?"

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

"No I can't."

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

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

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

"Why not?"

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

"Of course I do."

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

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

"That shouldn't be too difficult."

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

"Never!"

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

"I've never done things like that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I never heard such nonsense."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's not right, Pamela."

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

"We should never have done that."

"We!"