

## Unit I

### Tight Corners – E V Lucas

The talk was running on the critical situations in which we had found ourselves –those of us whose lives were adventurous enough to comprise any.

One man had been caught by the tide in Brittany and escaped by the skin of his teeth. Another had been on an elephant when a wounded tiger charged at it. A third had been on the top storey of burning house. A fourth was torpedoed in the war.

‘But you all talk,’ said one of company, ‘as though tight corners were always physical affairs. Surely they can be tighter when they are mental. The tightest corner I was ever in was at Christie’s!’

‘Christie’s!’

“Yes, I had been launching rather well at a club in St. James’ Street with an old friend from abroad, and, passing along King Street afterwards, he persuaded me to look in at the saleroom. The place was full. They were selling Barbizon pictures, and getting tremendous sums for each: two thousand, three thousand, for little bits of things – forest scenes, pools at evening, shepherdesses, the regular subjects. Nothing went as low as three figures at all. Well, we watched for a little while and then I found myself bidding too – just for fun. I had exactly sixty-three pounds in the bank and not enough securities to borrow five hundred on, and here I was nothing away to the auctioneer like a bloatocrat.

“You’ll get caught,” my friend said to me.

“No, I shan’t”, I said. “I’m not going to run any risks.”

‘And for a long time I didn’t. And then a picture was put up and a short red-faced man in a new top hat – some well-known dealer – who had bought quite number, electrified the room by starting the bidding at a figure a little higher than any that he had yet given or that anything had reached.

Although the previous lots had run into four figures they had all been modestly started at fifty guineas or a hundred guineas, with a gradual crescendo to which I had often been a safe contributor. But no sooner was the new picture displayed than the dealer made his sensational bid. ‘Four thousand guineas,’ he said.

‘There was a rustle of excitement, and at the end of it I heard my own voice saying, “And fifty!”

‘A terrible silence followed, during which the auctioneer looked inquiringly first at the opener and then at the company generally. To my surprise and horror the red-faced dealer gave no sign of life. I realized now, as I ought to have done at first, that he had shot his bolt.

“Four thousand and fifty guineas offered,” said the auctioneer, again searching the room.

‘My heart stopped; my blood congealed. There was no sound but a curious smothered noise from my friend.

“Four thousand and fifty guineas. Any Advance on four thousand and fifty guineas?” – and the hammer fell.

‘That was a nice pickle to be in! Here was I, with sixty-three pounds in the world and not five hundred pounds’ worth of securities, the purchaser of a picture which I didn’t want, for four thousand and fifty guineas, the top price of the day. Turning for some kindly support to my friend I found that he had left me; but not, as I feared at the moment, from baseness, but, as I afterwards discovered, in order to find a remote place in which to lean against that wall and laugh.

‘Stunned and dazed as I was, I pulled myself together sufficiently to hand my card, nonchalantly (I hope), to the clerk who came for the millionaire collector’s name, and then I set to pondering on the problem of what to do next. Picture after picture was put up and sold, but I saw none of them. I was running over the names of uncles and other persons from whom it might be possible to borrow, but wasn’t; wondering if the money-lenders who talk so glibly about “note of hand only” really mean it; speculating on the possibility of confessing my poverty to one of Christie’s staff and having the picture up again. Perhaps that was the best way – and yet having could I do it after all the other bids I had made? The Staff looked so prosperous and unsympathetic, and no one would believe it was a mistake. A genuine mistake of such a kind would have been rectified at once.

‘Meanwhile the sale came to an end. I stood on the outskirts of the little knot of buyers round the desk who were writing cheques and giving instructions. Naturally I preferred to be the last. It was there that I was joined by my friend; but only for a moment, for upon a look at my face he rammed his handkerchief in his mouth and again disappeared. Alone I was to dree this awful weird. I have never felt such a fool or had colder feet. I believe I should have welcomed a firing party.

‘And then the unexpected happened, and I realized that a career of rectitude sometimes has rewards beyond the mere consciousness of virtue. A Voice at my ear suddenly said, “Beg pardon, sir, but was you the gent that bought the big Daubigny?”

‘I admitted it.’

“Well, the gent who offered four thousand guineas wants to know if you’ll take fifty guineas for your bid.”

‘I ever a messenger of gods wore a green baize apron and spoke in husky cockney tones this was he. I could have embraced him and wept for joy. Would I take fifty guineas? Why I would have taken fifty farthings.

‘But how near the surface and ready, even in the best of us, is worldly guile! “Is that the most he would offer?” I had the presence of mind to ask.

“It’s not for me to say,” he replied. “No ‘arm in trying for a bit more is there?”

“Tell him I’ll take a hundred.” I said.

‘And I got it’.

‘When I found my friend I was laughing too but he became grave at once on seeing the cheque.

“Well, I’m hanged!” he said. “Of all the luck! Well, I’m hanged.”

‘Then he said, “Don’t forget that if it hadn’t been for me you wouldn’t have come into Christie’s at all.

“I shall never forget it,” I said. “Nor your deplorable mirth. Both are indelibly branded in letters of fire on my heart. My hair hasn’t gone white, has it?”

## **Glossary:**

Brittany – a region on the coast of North–West France

St. James’ Street, King Street – well-known commercial streets in London

bloatocrat – a fat and rich person of high station – a term coined by E.V. Lucas by blending the words ‘bloated’ and ‘aristocrat’

electrified – shocked by something unexpected

crescendo – progress towards a climax

congealed – thickened as if frozen (through fear etc.)

smothered – suppressed

nonchalantly – unconcernedly, coolly

glibly – smoothly but not sincerely

note of hand – promissory note

rectitude – honesty, good behaviour

farthing – as low as a paisa

baize – coarse woollen material

guile – cunning, deceit

indelible – cannot be rubbed out or removed

\*The phrase ‘dree this weird’ is from old English. It means ‘to put up with one's fate’.

## Questions and Answers

**a. Describe the activity that was going on in the sale room at King Street.**

In the sale room at king's street, an auction was going on. They were selling Barbizon pictures for large sums of money. They were getting 2000 £ or 3000 £ even for small pictures. The pictures contained forest scenes, pools, shepherdesses and the lake.

**b. What can you say about the author's attitude when he high-handedly participated in the auction?**

The author started to bid just for fun. He had only sixty three pounds in his bank account. He did not have enough securities to borrow even 500 £. But he was confident that somebody would outbid him and he could escape. This was his high handed attitude.

**c. Why was the author sure he would not be caught?**

The author had just sixty-three pounds in his bank account and he did not have enough securities to borrow money. But still he was bidding for fun. He was confident that somebody would outbid him and he could escape. And so it happened for some time.

**d. What made the author ignore his friend's warning?**

The author's friend advised him, “Don't bid like this. You will be caught”. But the author ignored his friend's advice, because for a long time he was safe. Somebody announced a higher offer than the author's and the author escaped. Therefore he ignored his friend's advice.

**e. How had the author managed the auction without getting involved in the deal?**

The author had just sixty three pounds in his bank account and he did not have enough securities to borrow money. But still he was bidding for fun. He. was confident that somebody would outbid him and he could escape. And so it happened for some time.

**f. What came as a shock to the author?**

When a new picture was put up, a short red-faced man in a new top hat offered “Four thousand Guineas”. The author announced, “And fifty”, expecting that the red-faced man would outbid him. But the man did not outbid the author. He was silent. This came as a shock to the author. Now, he was caught.

**g. What did the falling of the hammer indicate?**

The auctioneer announced “Four thousand and Fifty Guineas”, and looked all around. Nobody offered more than that and auctioneer said, “The picture is sold” and the hammer fell. The falling of hammer indicated that the picture was sold.

**h. What made the friend laugh heartily?**

The author had first sixty-three guineas, but he had offered Four thousand fifty guineas for a picture. Earlier his friend had advised him against bidding. Now, the author was caught. This made his friend laugh heartily.

**i. What kind of excuses did the narrator think he could make?**

The narrator was caught bidding a picture for 4050 guineas while he had only sixty-three guineas. So he thought of conferring his real financial condition to the staff of Christie and requesting the picture to be auctioned again.

**j. Why did the friend desert the narrator, a second time?**

The narrator’s friend left the place a second time. This time he went to the first red-faced bidder in order to save the narrator. He talked to the man and convinced to get the picture from the narrator by offering fifty guineas.

**k. How does the narrator describe the man who approached him?**

A man approached the narrator and said, “The gentleman who bade for four thousand guineas will give you fifty guineas and take the picture”. Now, the narrator felt that this man was like a messenger from the god, wearing a rough apron, speaking in a rough cockney dialect.

**l. How does the narrator show presence of mind in the sudden turn of events?**

The first bidder offered the narrator fifty guineas for the picture. The narrator had presence of mind and asked for a hundred guineas and got it!

**m. The narrator would not forget two things about his friend. What are they?**

The narrator would not forget two things about his friend.

- i. His friend took the narrator to the auction. Otherwise the narrator would not have gone there.
- ii. The narrator's friend secretly met and requested the red faced man to offer fifty guineas to the narrator. The narrator knew this later.

## **Summary**

In the humorous essay "Tight Corners" E. V. Lucas points out that tight corners can be both mental as well as physical but the mental tight corners are too difficult to bear.

Once the narrator went with his friend to Christie's, an Art Gallery and an auction-sale hall, where Barbizon pictures were put up. The narrator has neither knowledge about art pictures nor had enough money to participate in the bidding. He had only sixty-three pounds that too in the bank. He had no securities either. The auction was started and the narrator, not understanding the seriousness, started raising the bid amount marginally. By that time, a Daubigny picture was put on for sale. A Rich man bade four thousand guineas for it. As usual, the narrator, just for fun raised the bid by fifty guineas more.

Lucas thought that someone would raise the bid further. But, to his surprise, nobody else bade after that. The narrator was panic-stricken. No doubt, he unwittingly got into a (mental) tight corner. He could not find ways as how to raise such a huge amount. Sensing the impending danger his friend had already left the place. Finally, the narrator decided to confess his foolishness to the auctioneer himself and get rid of the critical situation.

Intermittently luck favours someone. In this case, also our narrator is favoured by the luck. All of a sudden, the unexpected incident happened. At that time of critical condition, a rich bidder's agent approached the narrator and offered fifty guineas, provided he passed on the art picture to the bidder. The narrator was immensely relieved. He was about to weep in joy. Yet, he had the presence of the mind to demand a hundred guineas. When a cheque for that amount was given to him, then his joy doubled.