

CASANOVA, MOVE OVER

ON a balmy morning last month, had you been woolgathering outside Pennsylvania Station, picking your teeth along with a dozen other shepherds engaged in the same pursuit, you might have seen the undersigned alight from a cab and hand down two ladies very like the Langhorne sisters. So marked was the similarity, indeed, that a buzz of admiration, mingled with comments of "What price the Langhorne sisters now?," issued from the bystanders. Long accustomed to the plaudits my wife and her sister arouse, the ovation caused me no particular emotion, other than a fleeting pang that my own startling resemblance to Lord Louis Mountbatten should have passed unnoticed. As the girls strode vivaciously down the arcade, spots of color glowed in their cheeks—partly because they were anticipating the holiday in store for them and partly because they were carrying their own luggage. Every year, when the catkins appear on the willowkins in Schling's, the two shake off their family responsibilities and snatch a blissful weekend at Atlantic City. They sleep until noon, live wholly on brownies and double-cream Alexanders, shop the auction rooms for bargains in bellpulls, and strive to outdo each other with tales of their husbands' maltreatment. This brief catharsis, it is held, restores the stamina necessary to eke out their lives—the best years of which, they hasten to add oracularly, they have expended on a couple of notable tyrants and ingrates.

"Now, what'll you do evenings while I'm away?" my wife asked as I bought her a glassine bag of cashews and a comic for the train. I replied that I was intending to shellac a paddle I had carved for the children and, in any time that remained, to write a short history of Byzantine art. Her lips tightened in disapproval. "I knew it," she said. "You're going to sit in the house and mope. Why don't you make some dates with people—take a nice girl out to dinner or the theatre?" Of course, I pooh-poohed the suggestion as ludicrous and unseemly; for all her concern, I could hardly envision a sober burgess like myself in Bustanoby's or Reisenweber's quaffing champagne wine from a sou-brette's slipper. My wife, though, was not so easily deflected. As we exchanged a farewell embrace on the platform, she renewed her appeal. An

evening of feminine society, she contended, would enliven a humdrum existence and stimulate me immeasurably. Troubled lest anxiety for my welfare cloud her vacation, I reluctantly agreed to cooperate, and the pair departed blithely for their spree among the carbohydrates.

NATURALLY, I had no intention whatever of fulfilling the pledge I had airily made, but within no more than five minutes it began to weigh heavy on me. Cursed from boyhood with an exaggerated sense of honor, I gritted my teeth and sought out a barbershop hard by, where I had myself shaved, manicured, shampooed, massaged, and conditioned in general for the fleshpots. Then I consulted my ancient address book, which I had supposed must yield a likely candidate for revelry. Its pages were far from rewarding. The sprightly nurse from Minnesota I had squired about in 1928 was at last reports an affluent *corsetière* in Framingham and the mother of five. Greta, a somnolent blonde off the prow of a Viking ship, as glacial as the diamonds I had showered her with, was chicken-farming on the Rogue River, in Oregon. There had once been a red-headed bobcat named Frankie with a lair on Varick Street, but the encroaching Sixth Avenue subway had flushed her from it, and she had left for parts unknown. The situation, in a word, augured little optimism.

It augured even less after a systematic telephone canvass, in alphabetical order, of the prospects that were left. All the *jeunes filles* in my record had either scattered to the four winds or contracted tiresome alliances with some insanely jealous boxer who chained them to the cookstove to prevent their straying. The outlook was becoming bleak indeed when I recalled Chloe, a demure Southern contralto in a musical show I once helped confect. Whether it was desperation or nostalgia for those bygone royalties, I remembered her as exuding a sultry, magnolia-scented charm. Surprisingly enough, she still dwelt at her former address, and her voice came over the wire freighted with the same languor, as though she had just eaten a double serving of spoon bread and yams. Chloe had difficulty identifying me at first, owing to a slight whistling sound produced by my upper plate, but we finally established a rap-

port and arranged to have cocktails in a chic East Side bar and go on from there to dinner.

EXCEPT for two hours spent roaching my hair down to mask its sparsity and trying on a couple of hundred neckties, I made no special preparations for the event. The first impact of Chloe, awaiting me in the anteroom of the bar, was a shade unnerving. The winsome shyness of old had given way to a certain theatrical dash, a definite aura of sophistication. Her shoulder-length hair was a sleek platinum and on it rode a Restoration cavalier's hat of shimmering green velvet the size of a cart wheel. A silver-fox chubby hung open to expose quantities of costume jewelry; her bag, modelled on those carried by postmen, was unaccountably emblazoned with the seal of Rutgers University.

"Sugar!" she carolled, enveloping me in clouds of Carte Blanche, the world's least expensive perfume. "I declare, you've gone and got as plump as a lil biddy shoat!"

I explained that the gray suit I was wearing probably made me look bulkier than I am. "It's a well-known optical illusion," I said. "You know, gray always makes people look heavier. Take me, for instance. Now, actually, I'm a thin person, but every time I put on a gray suit—"

"Listen, honey," she said decisively, "don't try to talk your way out of it. You and June are bustin' out all over. Come on, buy me a drink."

Our entrance into the bar awakened no more comment than would that of a two-headed calf. Of the ten clients dotted around the dim, pine-panelled interior, eight were unknown to me. The remaining two—a gossip columnist and a distant cousin wedded to a lawyer with a flourishing divorce practice, threw me broad, significant winks every time I glanced in their direction. Whatever doubts I had as to the suitability of the rendezvous were quickly banished by Chloe. She adored the sporting prints on the walls, she trilled, and the pink coats of the waiters; they reminded her of an old-time English tavern. "I guess it's because Daddy's Scotch-Irish on his mother's side," she went on with signal irrelevancy. "I get a boot out of those old characters smoking their churchwarden pipes and banging the pewter tankards on the table." Several ponies of bourbon, tossed off neat with a dispatch the old characters would have envied, started Chloe's tongue wagging, and she filled me in on her activities.





She was not gainfully employed at the moment; Ethel Merman, through nepotism and trickery, had nosed her out of the leading role in "Annie Get Your Gun." However, if her singing lessons continued at their present gratifying rate, Signor Doloroso predicted that Bidu Sayao would shortly be selling matches. To illustrate, Chloe uncorked an octave of such sheer power that the ashtrays started to dance. Realizing

the bar was much too cramped to permit adequate scope for her voice, I tactfully proposed that we adjourn to a small French place whose mussels are the best this side of St. Tropez. My vis-à-vis leaped at the idea. She adored mussels; they reminded her of France.

THE maître d'hôtel at Chez l'Argent was worldly enough to recognize a man desirous of privacy when

he saw one, and, replacing the hors-d'œuvre Chloe had brushed to the floor as we entered the place, he led us to a centrally located table on a spotlighted podium. From this point of vantage, I was able to discern a number of casual acquaintances—friends of my wife more than mine—who interrupted their meal to wave cheerily and jot down memoranda on their cuffs. The profusion of food on the menu enchanted Chloe,



"I figure I can always get one of them to start."

who was clearly surfeited with her diet of black-eyed peas and hominy. She ate daintily but unsparingly of foie gras, turtle soup, *truite au bleu*, and pressed duck with oranges, washing them down with a decent 1923 Beaune brought in under escort by a Holmes patrol.

My conversation, while undeniably sparkling, tended to be domestic rather than romantic. The prettiest coquetties I could devise invariably turned into accounts of witticisms the children or the dog had made; at one juncture I caught myself defending with passion a brand of soap powder used in our household. The fault, to be truthful, was not exclusively mine; apart from her parochial absorption in show business, Chloe was impossible to interest. She greeted the wealth of topics I introduced—our new vacuum cleaner, the shoddy quality of slipcovers one purchases nowadays, the butcher's overweening insolence—with an unvarying yawn of fatigue. Pique finally got the better of prudence, and I filed a few strictures on the shallow, frivolous personality typical of denizens of the Gay White Way. The homily had its effect. Drowsily supporting her chin on her hand, she stared deep into my eyes and told me I was cooking with gas.

When it came time to select a fitting liqueur, I learned that our choice of Chez l'Argent that night had been nothing short of providential. The management had just acquired a fabulously rare cognac; needless to say, it was not for sale, but M. Reynard yielded a point and allowed us, as connoisseurs, to inspect the bottle. Thawed by Chloe's soft impeachment, he yielded another point and granted us a thimbleful. From then on, Reynard fell back until he was in rout. It took an abacus, borrowed from an adjacent laundry, to compute the grand total of the check. I handed over my wallet in a peach-colored haze underscored by the throb of distant tom-toms. Fortunately, I had had the presence of mind to tuck several bills into my shoe, for all I got back was a sweepstakes ticket and the celluloid calendar of a savings bank. Gastronomical wizard that he was, M. Reynard was a greater ironist.

Speaking for myself, I would have preferred to cap our saturnalia with a glass of ice-cold milk and a fervent assurance to my songbird that I would call her up sometime, but Chloe was working on the principle that if you stumble onto a mother lode, you stick until the shovel is blunted. As she

steered me up the carpeted stairs of the Club Tornado, I wanly pleaded that my numerologist was expecting me at seven in the morning, that I was stricken with a return of black-water fever contracted in the New Hebrides, that the Mafia had sworn to expunge me if I were seen in public.

"We'll just stay for the three-o'clock floor show," Chloe wheedled. "I've got to have a lemonade for this awful thirst." Room was cleared for us at ring-side, a cigarette girl specially detailed to badger us with trayfuls of stale chocolates and gardenias, and a bonus promised the musicians if they whitened my hair by midnight. Notwithstanding these *douceurs*, Chloe was inclined to be sulky. "The joint is dead tonight," she said, pouting. "I don't see a soul I know."

My situation was more fortunate. Looking cursorily around, I managed to discover a good many familiar faces, all of them regarding me with strained attention. Some devilish magnetism had drawn together in our gallery three-quarters of my college class, most of the credit managers I had known in the past decade, a representative sprinkling of the arts and sciences, and the largest collection of copper's narks and tipsters ever assembled under one roof. They were particularly enthralled when my companion, her blood heated by four lemonades, twined her arms around my neck and posed for a candid-camera photographer. She subsequently became outraged at my refusal to buy the snapshots, but, as I pointed out very reasonably, I was bound to see them in the tabloids anyway.

I MEDIATE the three-o'clock floor show was well under way by the time I got home, and if the professional hockey players I abandoned Chloe to continued their gallantries, she must have had a barrel of laughs. Only a rotter would be sufficiently base to sneak off as I did, and I confess I afterward ate the bitter bread of repentance. My regimen, in fact, was fairly unusual from the second my wife returned from Atlantic City. I began by eating crow and have since subsisted almost entirely on humble pie. It's filling, but nowhere as tasty as pressed duck with oranges.

—S. J. PERELMAN

Our baby weighed 7½ pounds at birth, and at six months weighs nearly 15 pounds. We feed him. (Mrs. F.B.S.)—*Corning (N.Y.) Leader*.

How ingenious!