The Round Dozen

W. Somerset Maugham

I LIKE Elsom. It is a seaside resort in the South of England, not very far from Brighton, and it has something of the late Georgian charm of that agreeable town. But it is neither bustling nor garish. Ten years ago, when I used to go there not infrequently, you might still see here and there an old house, solid and pretentious in no unpleasing fashion (like a decayed gentlewoman of good family whose discreet pride in her ancestry amuses rather than offends you), which was built in the reign of the First Gentleman in Europe and where a courtier of fallen fortunes may well have passed his declining years. The main street had a lackadaisical air and the doctor’s motor seemed a trifle out of place. The housewives did their housekeeping in a leisurely manner. They gossiped with the butcher as they watched him cut from his great joint of South Down a piece of the best end of the neck, and they asked amiably after the grocer’s wife as he put half a pound of tea and a packet of salt into their string bag. I do not know whether Elsom was ever fashionable: it certainly was not so then; but it was respectable and cheap. Elderly ladies, maiden and widowed, lived there, Indian Civilians and retired soldiers: they looked forward with little shudders of dismay to August and September which would bring holiday-makers; but did not disdain to let them their houses and on the proceeds spend a few worldly weeks in a Swiss pension. I never knew Elsom at that hectic time when the lodging-houses were full and young men in blazers sauntered along the front, when Pierrots performed on the beach and in the billiard-room at the Dolphin you heard the click of balls till eleven at night. I only knew it in winter. Then in every house on the seafront, stucco houses with bow-windows built a hundred years ago, there was a sign to inform you that apartments were to let; and the guests of the Dolphin were waited on by a single waiter and the boots. At ten o’clock the porter came into the smoking-room and looked at you in so marked a manner that you got up and went to bed. Then Elsom was a restful place and the Dolphin a very comfortable inn. It was pleasing to think that the Prince Regent drove over with Mrs Fitzherbert more than once to drink a dish of tea in its coffee-room. In the hall was a framed letter from Mr Thackeray ordering a sitting-room and two bedrooms overlooking the sea and giving instructions that a fly should be sent to the station to meet him.

One November, two or three years after the war, having had a bad attack of influenza, I went down to Elsom to regain my strength. I arrived in the afternoon and when I had unpacked my things went for a stroll on the front. The sky was overcast and the calm sea grey and cold. A few seagulls flew close to the shore. Sailing-boats, their masts taken down for the winter, were drawn up high on the shingly beach, and the bathing-huts stood side by side in a long, grey, and tattered row. No one was sitting on the benches that the town council had put here and there, but a few people were trudging up and down for exercise. I passed an old colonel with a red nose who stamped along in plus-fours followed by a terrier, two elderly women in short skirts and stout shoes, and a plain girl in a tam-o’-shanter. I had never seen the front so deserted. The lodging-houses looked like bedraggled old maids waiting for lovers who would never return, and even the friendly Dolphin seemed wan and desolate. My heart sank. Life on a sudden seemed very drab. I returned to the hotel, drew the curtains of my sitting-room, poked the fire, and with a book sought to dispel my melancholy. But I was glad enough when it was time to dress for dinner. I went into the coffee-room and found the guests of the hotel already seated. I gave them a casual glance. There was one lady of middle age by herself and there were two elderly gentlemen, golfers probably, with red faces and baldish heads, who ate their food in moody silence. The only other persons in the room were a group of three who sat in the bow-window, and they immediately attracted my surprised attention. The party consisted of an old gentleman and two ladies, one of whom was old and probably his wife, while the other was younger and possibly his daughter. It was the old lady who first excited my interest. She wore a voluminous dress of black silk and a black lace cap; on her wrists were heavy gold bangles and round her neck a substantial gold chain from which hung a large gold locket; at her neck was a large gold brooch. I did not know that anyone still wore jewellery of that sort. Often, passing second-hand jewellers and pawnbrokers, I had lingered for a moment to look at these strangely old-fashioned articles, so solid, costly, and hideous, and thought with a smile in which there was a tinge of sadness, of the women long since dead who had worn them. They suggested the period when the bustle and the flounce were taking the place of the crinoline and the pork-pie hat was ousting the poke-bonnet. The British people liked things solid and good in those days. They went to church on Sunday morning and after church walked in the Park. They gave dinner-parties of twelve courses where the master of the house carved the beef and the chickens, and after dinner the ladies who could play favoured the company with Mendelssohn’s Songs without Words and the gentleman with the fine baritone voice sang an old English ballad.

The younger woman had her back turned to me and at first I could see only that she had a slim and youthful figure. She had a great deal of brown hair which seemed to be elaborately arranged. She wore a grey dress. The three of them were chatting in low tones and presently she turned her head so that I saw her profile. It was astonishingly beautiful. The nose was straight and delicate, the line of the cheek exquisitely modelled; I saw then that she wore her hair after the manner of Queen Alexandra. The dinner proceeded to its close and the party got up. The old lady sailed out of the room, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and the young one followed her. Then I saw with a shock that she was old. Her frock was simple enough, the skirt was longer than was at that time worn, and there was something slightly old-fashioned in the cut, I dare say the waist was more clearly indicated than was then usual, but it was a girl’s frock. She was tall, like a heroine of Tennyson’s, slight, with long legs and a graceful carriage. I had seen the nose before, it was the nose of a Greek goddess, her mouth was beautiful, and her eyes were large and blue. Her skin was of course a little tight on the bones and there were wrinkles on her forehead and about her eyes, but in youth it must have been lovely. She reminded you of those Roman ladies with features of an exquisite regularity whom Alma-Tadema used to paint, but who, notwithstanding their antique dress, were so stubbornly English. It was a type of cold perfection that one had not seen for five-and-twenty years. Now it is as dead as the epigram. I was like an archaeologist who finds some long-buried statue and I was thrilled in so unexpected a manner to hit upon this survival of a past era. For no day is so dead as the day before yesterday.

The gentleman rose to his feet when the two ladies left, and then resumed his chair. A waiter brought him a glass of heavy port. He smelt it, sipped it, and rolled it round his tongue. I observed him. He was a little man, much shorter than his imposing wife, well-covered without being stout, with a fine head of curling grey hair. His face was much wrinkled and it bore a faintly humorous expression. His lips were tight and his chin was square. He was, according to our present notions, somewhat extravagantly dressed. He wore a black velvet jacket, a frilled shirt with a low collar and a large black tie, and very wide evening trousers. It gave you vaguely the effect of costume. Having drunk his port with deliberation, he got up and sauntered out of the room.

When I passed through the hall, curious to know who these singular people were, I glanced at the visitors’ book. I saw written in an angular feminine hand, the writing that was taught to young ladies in modish schools forty years or so ago, the names: Mr and Mrs Edwin St Clair and Miss Porchester. Their address was given as 68 Leinster Square, Bayswater, London. These must be the names and this the address of the persons who had so much interested me. I asked the manageress who Mr St Clair was and she told me that she believed he was something in the City. I went into the billiard-room and knocked the balls about for a little while and then on my way upstairs passed through the lounge. The two red-faced gentlemen were reading the evening paper and the elderly lady was dozing over a novel. The party of three sat in a corner. Mrs St Clair was knitting, Miss Porchester was busy with embroidery, and Mr St Clair was reading aloud in a discreet but resonant tone. As I passed I discovered that he was reading Bleak House.

I read and wrote most of the next day, but in the afternoon I went for a walk and on my way home I sat down for a little on one of those convenient benches on the sea-front. It was not quite so cold as the day before and the air was pleasant. For want of anything better to do I watched a figure advancing towards me from a distance. It was a man and as he came nearer I saw that it was rather a shabby little man. He wore a thin black greatcoat and a somewhat battered bowler. He walked with his hands in his pockets and looked cold. He gave me a glance as he passed by, went on a few steps, hesitated, stopped and turned back. When he came up once more to the bench on which I sat he took

A hand out of his pocket and touched his hat. I noticed that he wore shabby black gloves, and surmised that he was a widower in straitened circumstances. Or he might have been a mute recovering, like myself, from influenza.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but could you oblige me with a match?”

“Certainly.”

He sat down beside me and while I put my hand in my pocket for matches he hunted in his for cigarettes. He took out a small packet of Gold Flake and his face fell.

“Dear, dear, how very annoying! I haven’t got a cigarette left.”

“Let me offer you one,” I replied, smiling.

I took out my case and he helped himself.

“Gold?” he asked, giving the case a tap as I closed it. “Gold? That’s a thing I never could keep. I’ve had three. All stolen.”

His eyes rested in a melancholy way on his boots, which were sadly in need of repair. He was a wizened little man with a long thin nose and pale-blue eyes. His skin was sallow and he was much lined. I could not tell what his age was; he might have been five-and-thirty or he might have been sixty. There was nothing remarkable about him except his insignificance. But though evidently poor he was neat and clean. He was respectable and he clung to respectability. No, I did not think he was a mute, I thought he was a solicitor’s clerk who had lately buried his wife and been sent to Elsom by an indulgent employer to get over the first shock of his grief.

“Are you making a long stay, sir?” he asked me.

“Ten days or a fortnight.”

“Is this your first visit to Elsom, sir?”

“I have been here before.”

“I know it well, sir. I flatter myself there are very few seaside resorts that I have not been to at one time or another. Elsom is hard to beat, sir. You get a very nice class of people here. There’s nothing noisy or vulgar about Elsom, if you understand what I mean. Elsom has very pleasant recollections for me, sir. I knew Elsom well in bygone days. I was married in St Martin’s Church, sir.”

“Really,” I said feebly.

“It was a very happy marriage, sir.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” I returned.

“Nine months, that one lasted,” he said reflectively.

Surely the remark was a trifle singular. I had not looked forward with any enthusiasm to the probability which I so clearly foresaw that he would favour me with an account of his matrimonial experiences, but now I waited if not with eagerness at least with curiosity for a further observation. He made none. He sighed a little. At last I broke the silence.

“There don’t seem to be very many people about,” I remarked.

“I like it so. I’m not one for crowds. As I was saying just now, I reckon I’ve spent a good many years at one seaside resort after the other, but I never came in the season. It’s the winter I like.”

“Don’t you find it a little melancholy?”

He turned towards me and placed his black-gloved hand for an instant on my arm.

“It is melancholy. And because it’s melancholy a little ray of sunshine is very welcome.”

The remark seemed to me perfectly idiotic and I did not answer. He withdrew his hand from my arm and got up.

“Well, I mustn’t keep you, sir. Pleased to have made your acquaintance.”

He took off his dingy hat very politely and strolled away. It was beginning now to grow chilly and I thought I would return to the Dolphin. As I reached its broad steps a landau drove up, drawn by two scraggy horses, and from it stepped Mr St Clair. He wore a hat that looked like the unhappy result of a union between a bowler and a top-hat. He gave his hand to his wife and then to his niece. The porter carried in after them rugs and cushions. As Mr St Clair paid the driver I heard him tell him to come at the usual time next day and I understood that the St Clairs took a drive every afternoon in a landau. It would not have surprised me to learn that none of them had ever been in a motor-car.

The manageress told me that they kept very much to themselves and sought no acquaintance among the other persons staying at the hotel. I rode my imagination on a loose rein. I watched them eat three meals a day. I watched Mr and Mrs St Clair sit at the top of the hotel steps in the morning. He read The Times and she knitted. I suppose Mrs St Clair had never read a paper in her life, for they never took anything but The Times and Mr St Clair of course took it with him every day to the City. At about twelve Miss Porchester joined them.

“Have you enjoyed your walk, Eleanor?” asked Mrs St Clair.

“It was very nice, Aunt Gertrude,” answered Miss Porchester.

And I understand that just as Mrs St Clair took “her drive’ every afternoon Miss Porchester took “her walk’ every morning.

“When you have come to the end of your row, my dear,” said Mr St Clair, with a glance at his wife’s knitting, “we might go for a constitutional before luncheon.”

“That will be very nice,” answered Mrs St Clair. She folded up her work and gave it to Miss Porchester. “If you’re going upstairs, Eleanor, will you take my work?”

“Certainly, Aunt Gertrude.”

“I dare say you’re a little tired after your walk, my dear.”

“I shall have a little rest before luncheon.”

Miss Porchester went into the hotel and Mr and Mrs St Clair walked slowly along the sea-front, side by side, to a certain point, and then walked slowly back.

When I met one of them on the stairs I bowed and received an unsmiling, polite bow in return, and in the morning I ventured upon a “good day’ but there the matter ended. It looked as though I should never have a chance to speak to any of them. But presently I thought that Mr St Clair gave me now and then a glance, and thinking he had heard my name I imagined, perhaps vainly, that he looked at me with curiosity. And a day or two after that I was sitting in my room when the porter came in with a message.

“Mr St Clair presents his compliments and could you oblige him with the loan of Whitaker’s Almanack.”

I was astonished.

“Why on earth should he think that I have a Whitaker’s Almanack?

“Well, sir, the manageress told him you wrote.”

I could not see the connexion.

“Tell Mr St Clair that I’m very sorry that I haven’t got a Whitaker”s Almanack, but if I had I would very gladly lend it to him.”

Here was my opportunity. I was by now filled with eagerness to know these fantastic persons more closely. Now and then in the heart of Asia I have come upon a lonely tribe living in a little village among an alien population.

No one knows how they came there or why they settled in that spot. They live their own lives, speak their own language, and have no communication with their neighbours. No one knows whether they are the descendants of a band that was left behind when their nation swept in a vast horde across the continent or whether they are the dying remnant of some great people that in that country once held empire. They are a mystery. They have no future and no history. This odd little family seemed to me to have something of the same character. They were of an era that is dead and gone. They reminded me of persons in one of those leisurely, old-fashioned novels that one’s father read. They belonged to the eighties and they had not moved since then. How extraordinary it was that they could have lived through the last forty years as though the world stood still! They took me back to my childhood and I recollected people who are long since dead. I wonder if it is only distance that gives me the impression that they were more peculiar than anyone is now. When a person was described then as “quite a character,” by heaven, it meant something.

So that evening after dinner I went into the lounge and boldly addressed Mr St Clair.

“I’m sorry I haven’t got a Whitaker’s AlmanackI said, “but if I have any other book that can be of service to you I shall be delighted to lend it to you.”

Mr St Clair was obviously startled. The two ladies kept their eyes on their work. There was an embarrassed hush.

“It does not matter at all, but I was given to understand by the manageress that you were a novelist.”

I racked my brain. There was evidently some connexion between my profession and Whitaker’s Almanack that escaped me.

“In days gone by Mr Trollope used often to dine with us in Leinster Square and I remember him saying that the two most useful books to a novelist were the Bible and Whitaker’s Almanack.”

“I see that Thackeray once stayed in this hotel,” I remarked, anxious not to let the conversation drop.

“I never very much cared for Mr Thackeray, though he dined more than once with my wife’s father, the late Mr Sargeant Saunders. He was too cynical for me. My niece has not read Vanity Fair to this day.”

Miss Porchester blushed slightly at this reference to herself. A waiter brought in the coffee and Mrs St Clair turned to her husband.

“Perhaps, my dear, this gentleman would do us the pleasure to have his coffee with us.”

Although not directly addressed I answered promptly: “Thank you very much.” I sat down.

“Mr Trollope was always my favourite novelist,” said Mr St Clair. “He was so essentially a gentleman. I admire Charles Dickens. But Charles Dickens could never draw a gentleman. I am given to understand that young people nowadays find Mr Trollope a little low. My niece, Miss Porchester, prefers the novels of Mr William Black.”

“I’m afraid I’ve never read any,” I said.

“Ah, I see that you are like me; you are not up to date. My niece once persuaded me to read a novel by a Miss Rhoda Broughton, but I could not manage more than a hundred pages of it.”

“I did not say I liked it, Uncle Edwin,” said Miss Porchester, defending herself, with another blush, “I told you it was rather fast, but everybody was talking about it.”

“I’m quite sure it is not the sort of book your Aunt Gertrude would have wished you to read, Eleanor.”

“I remember Miss Broughton telling me once that when she was young people said her books were fast and when she was old they said they were slow, and it was very hard since she had written exactly the same sort of book for forty years.”

“Oh, did you know Miss Broughton?” asked Miss Porchester, addressing me for the first time. “How very interesting! And did you know Ouida?”

“My dear Eleanor, what will you say next! I’m quite sure you’ve never read anything by Ouida.”

“Indeed, I have, Uncle Edwin. I’ve read Under Two Flags and I liked it very much.”

“You amaze and shock me. I don’t know what girls are coming to nowadays.”

“You always said that when I was thirty you gave me complete liberty to read anything I liked.”

“There is a difference, my dear Eleanor, between liberty and licence,” said Mr St Clair, smiling a little in order not to make his reproof offensive, but with a certain gravity.

I do not know if in recounting this conversation I have managed to convey the impression it gave me of a charming and old-fashioned air. I could have listened all night to them discussing the depravity of an age that was young in the eighteen-eighties. I would have given a good deal for a glimpse of their large and roomy house in Leinster Square. I should have recognized the suite covered in red brocade that stood stiffly about the drawing-room, each piece in its appointed place; and the cabinets filled with Dresden china would have brought me back my childhood. In the dining-room, where they habitually sat, for the drawing-room was used only for parties, was a Turkey carpet and a vast mahogany sideboard “groaning’ with silver. On the walls were the pictures that had excited the admiration of Mrs Humphrey Ward and her uncle Matthew in the Academy of eighteen-eighty.

Next morning, strolling through a pretty lane at the back of Elsom, I met Miss Porchester, who was taking “her walk’. I should have liked to go a little way with her, but felt certain that it would embarrass this maiden of fifty to saunter alone with a man even of my respectable years. She bowed as I passed her and blushed. Oddly enough, a few yards behind her I came upon the funny shabby little man in black gloves with whom I had spoken for a few minutes on the front. He touched his old bowler hat.

“Excuse me, sir, but could you oblige me with a match?” he said.

“Certainly,” I retorted, “but I’m afraid I have no cigarettes on me.”

“Allow me to offer you one of mine,” he said, taking out the paper case. It was empty. “Dear, dear, I haven’t got one either. What a curious coincidence!”

He went on and I had a notion that he a little hastened his steps. I was beginning to have my doubts about him. I hoped he was not going to bother Miss Porchester. For a moment I thought of walking back, but I did not. He was a civil little man and I did not believe he would make a nuisance of himself to a single lady.

I saw him again that very afternoon. I was sitting on the front. He walked towards me with little, halting steps. There was something of a wind and he looked like a dried leaf being driven before it. This time he did not hesitate, but sat down beside me.

“We meet again, sir. The world is a small place. If it will not inconvenience you perhaps you will allow me to rest a few minutes. I am a wee bit tired.”

“This is a public bench, and you have just as much right to sit on it as I.”

I did not wait for him to ask me for a match, but at once offered him a cigarette.

“How very kind of you, sir! I have to limit myself to so many cigarettes a day, but I enjoy those I smoke. As one grows older the pleasures of life diminish, but my experience is that one enjoys more those that remain.”

“That is a very consoling thought.”

“Excuse me, sir, but am I right in thinking that you are the well-known author?”

“I am an author,” I replied. “But what made you think it?”

“I have seen your portrait in the illustrated papers. I suppose you don’t recognize me?”

I looked at him again, a weedy little man in neat but shabby black clothes, with a long nose and watery blue eyes.

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“I dare say I’ve changed,” he sighed. “There was a time when my photograph was in every paper in the United Kingdom. Of course, those press photographers never do you justice. I give you my word, sir, that if I hadn’t seen my name underneath I should never have guessed that some of them were meant for me.”

He was silent for a while. The tide was out and beyond the shingle of the beach was a strip of yellow mud. The breakwaters were half buried in it like the backbones of prehistoric beasts.

“It must be a wonderfully interesting thing to be an author, sir. I’ve often thought I had quite a turn for writing myself. At one time and another I’ve done a rare lot of reading. I haven’t kept up with it much lately. For one thing my eyes are not so good as they used to be. I believe I could write a book if I tried.”

“They say anybody can write one,” I answered.

“Not a novel, you know. I’m not much of a one for novels; I prefer histories and that-like. But memoirs. If anybody was to make it worth my while I wouldn’t mind writing my memoirs.”

“It’s very fashionable just now.”

“There are not many people who’ve had the experiences I’ve had in one way and another. I did write to one of the Sunday papers about it some little while back, but they never answered my letter.”

He gave me a long, appraising look. He had too respectable an air to be about to ask me for half a crown.

“Of course you don’t know who I am, sir, do you?”

“I honestly don’t.”

He seemed to ponder for a moment, then he smoothed down his black gloves on his fingers, looked for a moment at a hole in one of them, and then turned to me not without self-consciousness.

“I am the celebrated Mortimer Ellis,” he said.

“Oh?”

I did not know what other ejaculation to make, for to the best of my belief I had never heard the name before. I saw a look of disappointment come over his face, and I was a trifle embarrassed.

“Mortimer Ellis,” he repeated. “You’re not going to tell me you don’t know.”

“I’m afraid I must. I’m very often out of England.”

I wondered to what he owed his celebrity. I passed over in my mind various possibilities. He could never have been an athlete, which alone in England gives a man real fame, but he might have been a faith-healer or a champion billiard-player. There is of course no one so obscure as a Cabinet Minister out of office and he might have been the President of the Board of Trade in a defunct administration. But he had none of the look of a politician.

“That’s fame for you,” he said bitterly. “Why, for weeks I was the most talked-about man in England. Look at me. You must have seen my photograph in the papers. Mortimer Ellis.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head.

He paused a moment to give his disclosure effectiveness.

“I am the well-known bigamist.”

Now what are you to reply when a person who is practically a stranger to you informs you that he is a well-known bigamist? I will confess that I have sometimes had the vanity to think that I am not as a rule at a loss for a retort, but here I found myself speechless.

“I’ve had eleven wives, sir,” he went on.

“Most people find one about as much as they can manage.”

“Ah, that’s want of practice. When you’ve had eleven there’s very little you don’t know about women.”

“But why did you stop at eleven?”

“There now, I knew you’d say that. The moment I set eyes on you I said to myself, he’s got a clever face. You know, sir, that’s the thing that always grizzles me. Eleven does seem a funny number, doesn’t it? There’s something unfinished about it. Now three anyone might have, and seven’s all right, they say nine’s lucky, and there’s nothing wrong with ten. But eleven! That’s the one thing I regret. I shouldn’t have minded anything if I could have brought it up to the Round Dozen.”

He unbuttoned his coat and from an inside pocket produced a bulging and very greasy pocket-book. From this he took a large bundle of newspaper cuttings; they were worn and creased and dirty. But he spread out two or three.

“Now just you look at those photographs. I ask you, are they like me? It’s an outrage. Why, you’d think I was a criminal to look at them.”

The cuttings were of imposing length. In the opinion of sub-editors Mortimer Ellis had obviously been a news item of value. One was headed, A Much Married Man; another, Heartless Ruffian Brought to Book; a third, Contemptible Scoundrel Meets his Waterloo.

“Not what you would call a good press,” I murmured.

“I never pay any attention to what the newspapers say,” he answered, with a shrug of his thin shoulders. “I’ve known too many journals myself for that. No, it’s the judge I blame. He treated me shocking and it did him no good, mind you; he died within the year.”

I ran my eyes down the report I held.

“I see he gave you five years.”

“Disgraceful, I call it, and see what it says.” He pointed to a place with his forefinger.

“‘Three of his victims pleaded for mercy to be shown to him.’ That shows what they thought of me. And after that he gave me five years. And just look what he called me, a heartless scoundrel-me, the best-hearted man that ever lived-a pest of society and a danger to the public. Said he wished he had the power to give me the cat. I don’t so much mind his giving me five years, though you’ll never get me to say it wasn’t excessive, but I ask you, had he the right to talk to me like that? No, he hadn’t, and I’ll never forgive him, not if I live to be a hundred.”

The bigamist’s cheeks flushed and his watery eyes were filled for a moment with fire. It was a sore subject with him.

“May I read them?” I asked him.

“That’s what I gave them you for. I want you to read them, sir. And if you can read them without saying that I’m a much wronged man, well, you’re not the man I took you for.”

As I glanced through one cutting after another I saw why Mortimer Ellis had so wide an acquaintance with the seaside resorts of England. They were his hunting-ground. His method was to go to some place when the season was over and take apartments in one of the empty lodging-houses. Apparently it did not take him long to make acquaintance with some woman or other, widow or spinster, and I noticed that their ages at the time were between thirty-five and fifty. They stated in the witness-box that they had met him first on the sea-front. He generally proposed marriage to them within a fortnight of this and they were married shortly after. He induced them in one way or another to entrust him with their savings and in a few months, on the pretext that he had to go to London on business, he left them never to return. Only one had ever seen him again till, obliged to give evidence, they saw him in the dock. They were women of a certain respectability; one was the daughter of a doctor and another of a clergyman; there was a lodging-house keeper, there was the widow of a commercial traveller, and there was a retired dressmaker. For the most part, their fortunes ranged from five hundred to a thousand pounds, but whatever the sum the misguided women were stripped of every penny. Some of them told really pitiful stories of the destitution to which they had been reduced. But they all acknowledged that he had been a good husband to them. Not only had three actually pleaded for mercy to be shown him, but one said in the witness-box that, if he was willing to come, she was ready to take him back. He noticed that I was reading this.

“And she’d have worked for me,” he said, “there’s no doubt about that. But I said, better let bygones be bygones. No one likes a cut off the best end of the neck better than I do, but I’m not much of a one for cold roast mutton, I will confess.”

It was only by an accident that Mortimer Ellis did not marry his twelfth wife and so achieve the Round Dozen which I understand appealed to his love of symmetry. For he was engaged to be married to a Miss Hubbard-“two thousand pounds she had, if she had a penny, in war-loan,” he confided to me-and the banns had been read, when one of his former wives saw him, made inquiries, and communicated with the police. He was arrested on the very day before his twelfth wedding.

“She was a bad one, she was,” he told me. “She deceived me something cruel.”

“How did she do that?”

“Well, I met her at Eastbourne, one December it was, on the pier, and she told me in course of conversation that she’d been in the millinery business and had retired. She said she’d made a tidy bit of money. She wouldn’t say exactly how much it was, but she gave me to understand it was something like fifteen hundred pounds. And when I married her, would you believe it, she hadn’t got three hundred. And that’s the one who gave me away. And mind you, I’d never blamed her. Many a man would have cut up rough when he found out he’d been made a fool of. I never showed her that I was disappointed even, I just went away without a word.”

“But not without the three hundred pounds, I take it.”

“Oh come, sir, you must be reasonable,” he returned in an injured tone. “You can’t expect three hundred pounds to last for ever and I’d been married to her for months before she confessed the truth.”

“Forgive my asking,” I said, “and pray don’t think my question suggests a disparaging view of your personal attractions, but-why did they marry you?”

“Because I asked them,” he answered, evidently very much surprised at my inquiry.

“But did you never have any refusals?”

“Very seldom. Not more than four or five in the whole course of my career. Of course I didn’t propose till I was pretty sure of my ground and I don’t say I didn’t draw a blank sometimes. You can’t expect to click every time, if you know what I mean, and I’ve often wasted several weeks making up to a woman before I saw there was nothing doing.”

I surrendered myself for a time to my reflections. But I noticed presently that a broad smile spread over the mobile features of my friend.

“I understand what you mean,” he said. “It’s my appearance that puzzles you. You don’t know what it is they see in me. That’s what comes of reading novels and going to the pictures. You think what women want is the cowboy type, or the romance of old Spain touch, flashing eyes, an olive skin, and a beautiful dancer. You make me laugh.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

“Are you a married man, sir?”

“I am. But I only have one wife.”

“You can’t judge by that. You can’t generalize from a single instance, if you know what I mean. Now, I ask you, what would you know about dogs if you’d never had anything but one bull-terrier?”

The question was rhetorical and I felt sure did not require an answer. He paused for an effective moment and went on.

“You’re wrong, sir. You’re quite wrong. They may take a fancy to a good-looking young fellow, but they don’t want to marry him. They don’t really care about looks.”

“Douglas Jerrold, who was as ugly as he was witty, used to say that if he was given ten minutes’ start with a woman he could cut out the handsomest man in the room.”

“They don’t want wit. They don’t want a man to be funny; they think he’s not serious. They don’t want a man who’s too handsome; they think he’s not serious either. That’s what they want, they want a man who’s serious. Safety first. And then-attention. I may not be handsome and I may not be amusing, but believe me, I’ve got what every woman wants. Poise. And the proof is, I’ve made every one of my wives happy.”

“It certainly is much to your credit that three of them pleaded for mercy to be shown to you and that one was willing to take you back.”

“You don’t know what an anxiety that was to me all the time I was in prison. I thought she’d be waiting for me at the gate when I was released and I said to the Governor: ‘For God’s sake, sir, smuggle me out so as no one can see me.’”

He smoothed his gloves again over his hands and his eye once more fell upon the hole in the first finger.

“That’s what comes of living in lodgings, sir. How’s a man to keep himself neat and tidy without a woman to look after him? I’ve been married too often to be able to get along without a wife. There are men who don’t like being married. I can’t understand them. The fact is, you can’t do a thing really well unless you’ve got your heart in it, and I like being a married man. It’s no difficulty to me to do the little things that women like and that some men can’t be bothered with. As I was saying just now, it’s attention a woman wants. I never went out of the house without giving my wife a kiss and I never came in without giving her another. And it was very seldom I came in without bringing her some chocolates or a few flowers. I never grudged the expense.”

“After all, it was her money you were spending,” I interposed.

“And what if it was? It’s not the money that you’ve paid for a present that signifies, it’s the spirit you give it in. That’s what counts with women. No, I’m not one to boast, but I will say this of myself, I am a good husband.”

I looked desultorily at the reports of the trial which I still held.

“I’ll tell you what surprises me,” I said. “All these women were very respectable, of a certain age, quiet, decent persons. And yet they married you without any inquiry after the shortest possible acquaintance.”

He put his hand impressively on my arm.

“Ah, that’s what you don’t understand, sir. Women have got a craving to be married. It doesn’t matter how young they are or how old they are, if they’re short or tall, dark or fair, they’ve all got one thing in common: they want to be married. And mind you, I married them in church. No woman feels really safe unless she’s married in church. You say I’m no beauty, well, I never thought I was, but if I had one leg and a hump on my back I could find any number of women who’d jump at the chance of marrying me. It’s a mania with them. It’s a disease. Why, there’s hardly one of them who wouldn’t have accepted me the second time I saw her only I like to make sure of my ground before I commit myself. When it all came out there was a rare to-do because I’d married eleven times. Eleven times? Why, it’s nothing, it’s not even a Round Dozen. I could have married thirty times if I’d wanted to. I give you my word, sir, when I consider my opportunities, I’m astounded at my moderation.”

“You told me you were very fond of reading history.”

“Yes, Warren Hastings said that, didn’t he? It struck me at the time I read it. It seemed to fit me like a glove.”

“And you never found these constant courtships a trifle monotonous?”

“Well, sir, I think I’ve got a logical mind, and it always gave me a rare lot of pleasure to see how the same effects followed on the same causes, if you know what I mean. Now, for instance, with a woman who’d never been married before I always passed myself off as a widower. It worked like a charm. You see, a spinster likes a man who knows a thing or two. But with a widow I always said I was a bachelor: a widow’s afraid a man who’s been married before knows too much.”

I gave him back his cuttings; he folded them up neatly and replaced them in his greasy pocket-book.

“You know, sir, I always think I’ve been misjudged. Just see what they say about me: a pest of society, unscrupulous villain, contemptible scoundrel. Now just look at me. I ask you, do I look that sort of man? You know me, you’re a judge of character, I’ve told you all about myself; do you think me a bad man?”

“My acquaintance with you is very slight,” I answered with what I thought considerable tact.

“I wonder if the judge, I wonder if the jury, I wonder if the public ever thought about my side of the question. The public booed me when I was taken into the court and the police had to protect me from their violence. Did any of them think what I’d done for these women?”

“You took their money.”

“Of course I took their money. I had to live the same as anybody has to live. But what did I give them in exchange for their money?”

This was another rhetorical question and though he looked at me as though he expected an answer I held my tongue. Indeed I did not know the answer. His voice was raised and he spoke with emphasis. I could see that he was serious.

“I’ll tell you what I gave them in exchange for their money. Romance. Look at this place.” He made a wide, circular gesture that embraced the sea and the horizon. “There are a hundred places in England like this. Look at that sea and that sky; look at these lodging-houses; look at that pier and the front. Doesn’t it make your heart sink? It’s dead as mutton. It’s all very well for you who come down here for a week or two because you’re run down. But think of all those women who live here from one year’s end to another. They haven’t a chance. They hardly know anyone. They’ve just got enough money to live on and that’s all. I wonder if you know how terrible their lives are. Their lives are just like the front, a long, straight, cemented walk that goes on and on from one seaside resort to another. Even in the season there’s nothing for them. They’re out of it. They might as well be dead. And then I come along. Mind you, I never made advances to a woman who wouldn’t have gladly acknowledged to thirty-five. And I give them love. Why, many of them had never known what it was to have a man do them up behind. Many of them had never known what it was to sit on a bench in the dark with a man’s arm round their waist. I bring them change and excitement. I give them a new pride in themselves. They were on the shelf and I come along quite quietly and I deliberately take them down. A little ray of sunshine in those drab lives, that’s what I was. No wonder they jumped at me, no wonder they wanted me to go back to them. The only one who gave me away was the milliner; she said she was a widow, my private opinion is that she’d never been married at all. You say I did the dirty on them; why, I brought happiness and glamour into eleven lives that never thought they had even a dog’s chance of it again. You say I’m a villain and a scoundrel, you’re wrong. I’m a philanthropist. Five years, they gave me; they should have given me the medal of the Royal Humane Society.”

He took out his empty packet of Gold Flake and looked at it with a melancholy shake of the head. When I handed him my cigarette case he helped himself without a word. I watched the spectacle of a good man struggling with his emotion.

“And what did I get out of it, I ask you?” he continued presently. “Board and lodging and enough to buy cigarettes. But I never was able to save, and the proof is that now, when I’m not so young as I was, I haven’t got half a crown in my pocket.” He gave me a sidelong glance. “It’s a great come-down for me to find myself in this position. I’ve always paid my way and I’ve never asked a friend for a loan in all my life. I was wondering, sir, if you could oblige me with a trifle. It’s humiliating to me to have to suggest it, but the fact is, if you could oblige me with a pound it would mean a great deal to me.”

Well, I had certainly had a pound’s worth of entertainment out of the bigamist and I dived for my pocket-book.

“I shall be very glad,” I said.

He looked at the notes I took out.

“I suppose you couldn’t make it two, sir?”

“I think I could.”

I handed him a couple of pound notes and he gave a little sigh as he took them.

“You don’t know what it means to a man who’s used to the comforts of home life not to know where to turn for a night’s lodging.”

“But there is one thing I should like you to tell me,” I said. “I shouldn’t like you to think me cynical, but I had a notion that women on the whole take the maxim, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive,’ as applicable exclusively to our sex. How did you persuade these respectable, and no doubt thrifty, women to entrust you so confidently with all their savings?”

An amused smile spread over his undistinguished features.

“Well, sir, you know what Shakespeare said about ambition o’erleaping itself. That’s the explanation. Tell a woman you’ll double her capital in six months if she’ll give it you to handle and she won’t be able to give you the money quick enough. Greed, that’s what it is. Just greed.”

It was a sharp sensation, stimulating to the appetite (like hot sauce with ice cream), to go from this diverting ruffian to the respectability, all lavender bags and crinolines, of the St Clairs and Miss Porchester. I spent every evening with them now. No sooner had the ladies left him than Mr St Clair sent his compliments to my table and asked me to drink a glass of port with him. When we had finished it we went into the lounge and drank coffee. Mr St Clair enjoyed his glass of old brandy. The hour I thus spent with them was so exquisitely boring that it had for me a singular fascination. They were told by the manageress that I had written plays.

“We used often to go to the theatre when Sir Henry Irving was at the Lyceum,” said Mr St Clair. “I once had the pleasure of meeting him. I was taken to supper at the Garrick Club by Sir Everard Millais and I was introduced to Mr Irving, as he then was.”

“Tell him what he said to you, Edwin,” said Mrs St Clair.

Mr St Clair struck a dramatic attitude and gave not at all a bad imitation of Henry Irving.

“‘You have the actor’s face, Mr St Clair,’ he said to me. ‘If you ever think of going on the stage, come to me and I will give you a part.’” Mr St Clair resumed his natural manner. “It was enough to turn a young man’s head.”

“But it didn’t turn yours,” I said.

“I will not deny that if I had been otherwise situated I might have allowed myself to be tempted. But I had my family to think of. It would have broken my father’s heart if I had not gone into the business.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“I am a tea merchant, sir. My firm is the oldest in the City of London. I have spent forty years of my life in combating to the best of my ability the desire of my fellow-countrymen to drink Ceylon tea instead of the China tea which was universally drunk in my youth.”

I thought it charmingly characteristic of him to spend a lifetime in persuading the public to buy something they didn’t want rather than something they did.

“But in his younger days my husband did a lot of amateur acting and he was thought very clever,” said Mrs St Clair.

“Shakespeare, you know, and sometimes The School for Scandal I would never consent to act trash. But that is a thing of the past. I had a gift, perhaps it was a pity to waste it, but it’s too late now. When we have a dinner-party I sometimes let the ladies persuade me to recite the great soliloquies of Hamlet. But that is all I do.”

Oh! Oh! Oh! I thought with shuddering fascination of those dinner-parties and wondered whether I should ever be asked to one of them. Mrs St Clair gave me a little smile, half shocked, half prim.

“My husband was very Bohemian as a young man,” she said.

“I sowed my wild oats. I knew quite a lot of painters and writers, Wilkie Collins, for instance, and even men who wrote for the papers. Watts painted a portrait of my wife, and I bought a picture of Millais. I knew a number of the Pre-Raphaelites.”

“Have you a Rossetti?” I asked.

“No. I admired Rossetti’s talent, but I could not approve of his private life. I would never buy a picture by an artist whom I should not care to ask to dinner at my house.”

My brain was reeling when Miss Porchester, looking at her watch, said: “Are you not going to read to us tonight, Uncle Edwin?”

I withdrew.

It was while I was drinking a glass of port with Mr St Clair one evening that he told me the sad story of Miss Porchester. She was engaged to be married to a nephew of Mrs St Clair, a barrister, when it was discovered that he had had an intrigue with the daughter of his laundress.

“It was a terrible thing,” said Mr St Clair. “A terrible thing. But of course my niece took the only possible course. She returned him his ring, his letters, and his photograph, and said that she could never marry him. She implored him to marry the young person he had wronged and said she would be a sister to her. It broke her heart. She has never cared for anyone since.”

“And did he marry the young person?”

Mr St Clair shook his head and sighed.

“No, we were greatly mistaken in him. It has been a sore grief to my dear wife to think that a nephew of hers should behave in such a dishonourable manner. Some time later we heard that he was engaged to a young lady in a very good position with ten thousand pounds of her own. I considered it my duty to write to her father and put the facts before him. He answered my letter in a most insolent fashion. He said he would much rather his son-in-law had a mistress before marriage than after.”

“What happened then?”

“They were married and now my wife’s nephew is one of His Majesty’s Judges of the High Court, and his wife is My Lady. But we’ve never consented to receive them. When my wife’s nephew was knighted Eleanor suggested that we should ask them to dinner, but my wife said that he should never darken our doors and I upheld her.”

“And the laundress’s daughter?”

“She married in her own class of life and has a public-house at Canterbury. My niece, who has a little money of her own, did everything for her and is godmother to her eldest child.”

Poor Miss Porchester. She had sacrificed herself on the altar of Victorian morality and I am afraid the consciousness that she had behaved beautifully was the only benefit she had got from it.

“Miss Porchester is a woman of striking appearance,” I said. “When she was younger she must have been perfectly lovely. I wonder she never married somebody else.”

“Miss Porchester was considered a great beauty. Alma-Tadema admired her so much that he asked her to sit as a model for one of his pictures, but of course we couldn’t very well allow that.” Mr St Clair’s tone conveyed that the suggestion had deeply outraged his sense of decency. “No, Miss Porchester never cared for anyone but her cousin. She never speaks of him and it is now thirty years since they parted, but I am convinced that she loves him still. She is a true woman, my dear sir, one life, one love, and though perhaps I regret that she has been deprived of the joys of marriage and motherhood I am bound to admire her fidelity.”

But the heart of woman is incalculable and rash is the man who thinks she will remain in one stay. Rash, Uncle Edwin. You have known Eleanor for many years, for when, her mother having fallen into a decline and died, you brought the orphan to your comfortable and even luxurious house in Leinster Square, she was but a child; but what, when it comes down to brass tacks, Uncle Edwin, do you really know of Eleanor?

It was but two days after Mr St Clair had confided to me the touching story which explained why Miss Porchester had remained a spinster that, coming back to the hotel in the afternoon after a round of golf, the manageress came up to me in an agitated manner.

“Mr St Clair’s compliments and will you go up to number twenty-seven the moment you come in.”

“Certainly. But why?”

“Oh, there’s a rare upset. They’ll tell you.”

I knocked at the door. I heard a “Come in, come in,” which reminded me that Mr St Clair had played Shakespearean parts in probably the most refined amateur dramatic company in London. I entered and found Mrs St Clair lying on the sofa with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne on her brow and a bottle of smelling-salts in her hand. Mr St Clair was standing in front of the fire in such a manner as to prevent anyone else in the room from obtaining any benefit from it.

“I must apologize for asking you to come up in this unceremonious fashion, but we are in great distress, and we thought you might be able to throw some light on what has happened.”

His perturbation was obvious.

“What has happened?”

“Our niece, Miss Porchester, has eloped. This morning she sent in a message to my wife that she had one of her sick headaches. When she has one of her sick headaches she likes to be left absolutely alone and it wasn’t till this afternoon that my wife went to see if there was anything she could do for her. The room was empty. Her trunk was packed. Her dressing-case with silver fittings was gone. And on the pillow was a letter telling us of her rash act.”

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “I don’t know exactly what I can do.”

“We were under the impression that you were the only gentleman at Elsom with whom she had any acquaintance.”

His meaning flashed across me.

“I haven’t eloped with her,” I said. “I happen to be a married man.”

“I see you haven’t eloped with her. At the first moment we thought perhaps … but if it isn’t you, who is it?”

“I’m sure I don’t know.”

“Show him the letter, Edwin,” said Mrs St Clair from the sofa.

“Don’t move, Gertrude. It will bring on your lumbago.”

Miss Porchester had “her’ sick headaches and Mrs St Clair had “her’ lumbago. What had Mr St Clair? I was willing to bet a fiver that Mr St Clair had “his’ gout. He gave me the letter and I read it with an air of decent commiseration.

Dearest Uncle Edwin and Aunt Gertrude

When you receive this I shall be far away. I am going to be married this morning to a gentleman who is very dear to me. I know I am doing wrong in running away like this, but I was afraid you would endeavour to set obstacles in the way of my marriage and since nothing would induce me to change my mind I thought it would save us all much unhappiness if I did it without telling you anything about it. My fiancé is a very retiring man, owing to his long residence in tropical countries not in the best of health, and he thought it much better that we should be married quite privately. When you know how radiantly happy I am I hope you will forgive me. Please send my box to the luggage office at Victoria Station.

Your loving niece, Eleanor

“I will never forgive her,” said Mr St Clair as I returned him the letter. “She shall never darken my doors again. Gertrude, I forbid you ever to mention Eleanor’s name in my hearing.”

Mrs St Clair began to sob quietly.

“Aren’t you rather hard?” I said. “Is there any reason why Miss Porchester shouldn’t marry?”

“At her age,” he answered angrily. “It’s ridiculous. We shall be the laughingstock of everyone in Leinster Square. Do you know how old she is? She’s fifty-one.”

“Fifty-four,” said Mrs St Clair through her sobs.

“She’s been the apple of my eye. She’s been like a daughter to us. She’s been an old maid for years. I think it’s positively improper for her to think of marriage.”

“She was always a girl to us, Edwin,” pleaded Mrs St Clair.

“And who is this man she’s married? It’s the deception that rankles. She must have been carrying on with him under our very noses. She does not even tell us his name. I fear the very worst.”

Suddenly I had an inspiration. That morning after breakfast I had gone out to buy myself some cigarettes and at the tobacconist’s I ran across Mortimer Ellis. I had not seen him for some days.

“You’re looking very spruce,” I said.

His boots had been repaired and were neatly blacked, his hat was brushed, he was wearing a clean collar and new gloves. I thought he had laid out my two pounds to advantage.

“I have to go to London this morning on business,” he said.

I nodded and left the shop.

I remembered that a fortnight before, walking in the country, I had met Miss Porchester and, a few yards behind, Mortimer Ellis. Was it possible that they had been walking together and he had fallen back as they caught sight of me? By heaven, I saw it all.

“I think you said that Miss Porchester had money of her own,” I said.

“A trifle. She has three thousand pounds.”

Now I was certain. I looked at them blankly. Suddenly Mrs St Clair, with a cry, sprang to her feet.

“Edwin, Edwin, supposing he doesn’t marry her?”

Mr St Clair at this put his hand to his head and in a state of collapse sank into a chair.

“The disgrace would kill me,” he groaned.

“Don’t be alarmed,” I said. “He’ll marry her all right. He always does. He’ll marry her in church.”

They paid no attention to what I said. I suppose they thought I’d suddenly taken leave of my senses. I was quite sure now. Mortimer Ellis had achieved his ambition after all. Miss Porchester completed the Round Dozen.