

Murder Most Stupid

by

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This is a work of fiction, yada, yada, yada.

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The immoral rights of the author have also been asserted, albeit a trifle more shamefacedly.

Book One

Chapter One

It was twenty to five in the afternoon when Mister Pluck waddled into the hotel foyer. He was normally a man who could walk like other men—with long, vigorous, purposeful, manly strides—but our usually famously observant hero had in this instance forgotten to remove his skis. Mifkin, the large and exceedingly correct porter with a moustache envied by all the staff, rushed towards him.

“Ah, my good man,” Pluck addressed him, “be a good chap and see to the radiator in my room, won’t you? It hoots and whistles like a strangled canary with a lisp, and confoundedly forbids my afternoon naps.”

Mifkin, all six and three-quarter feet of him, bowed before the gentleman, then, with his brow lingering pensively over the deep taupe carpet, whispered, with exemplary tact: “Your skis, sir.”

“What?!” demanded Pluck huffily. “What’s that about skis, man?!”

“Sir surely does not wish to wear his skis up to his room, and during his nap, I presume?”

Pluck laughed with contempt. “What in blazes do you mean, you bumbling idiot?! Ha! My skis, my—?!” But though he did not want to, though he fought, with every ounce of his formidable will, against the impulse, some unseen force, outside himself, caused him to tilt his gaze downward, where he was rewarded with an unsparing burst of self-knowledge, grasping at once the embarrassing picture he presented to the three-tier Louis the Sixteenth chandelier, the brocaded bergères housing several members of the noble and bourgeois spheres, the grand staircase, the gaping bellhop, and the Pekingese.

Flushing a beautifully rich mauve, Pluck crouched down and fumbled with the ski locks. “Argh! Those cack-handed ski makers have botched the job once again! I can’t get these blasted things off! Help me, God damn you, help me!”

Thus summoned, Mifkin knelt, first one knee and then the other, and proceeded to offer his best assistance—which, as we shall see, fell disgracefully short of Mister Pluck’s requirements.

“Hurry, you clumsy swine!” hissed the latter.

“Yes, sir,” mumbled the former.

The question which insinuated itself into Pluck’s mind, like an insistent sperm into a coy egg, was this: *Should I strike him? Should I strike him till he wilts, justly humbled, to the floor?* Whilst his antagonist might, judging from appearances, have boasted that which Pluck lacked—a brute, crass physical strength such as that allotted to a dumb beast, which would appear wholly unseemly in a gentleman—he, Pluck, by virtue of his dignity, his richly cultured soul and, yes, he would not deny it, his class (somewhat less than noble, but indisputably more than common), could certainly pride himself on a moral superiority which any objective observer, if such a thing were possible, would acknowledge. Might, then, in response to the world’s last-ditch appeal to Providence to divulge some proof that justice on this earth, which had long since been presumed dead, survived, some presiding deity guide his hand to knock this ingrate down, and thereby re-establish order in a world which wobbled on the precipice of chaos, imbue meaning in a culture fading listlessly into dissolution, and, incidentally, prove to all Pluck’s position as the pre-eminent personage of his age?

Pluck’s fingers, in the midst of such apocalyptic musing, shook, which only made the task he and the porter shared between them that much more difficult to complete. “Hurry!” he whispered. “Everybody’s looking! Is the sole aim of your puny existence the irrevocable ruin of my reputation?!”

Larry the bellhop, whom everyone on the staff called “Poor Larry”, not on account of his salary, which, yes, left much to be desired, but because of a harrowing, self-pitying look about his young features, shuffled over.

“May I help, Mister Mifkin?” asked he.

“No thank you,” Mifkin replied.

“Go away!” screamed Pluck, throat choked with rising bile. His shout drew the hotel’s manager over in a flash.

“What’s the problem here?!” demanded Herr Voot. “Mifkin! What’s the matter with you?! Leave monsieur’s feet alone!”

Mifkin, hands still at work, raised his face to his superior, self-respect intact: “Herr Voot, Mister Pluck asked me to help him untie his skis. As you know, sir, I do solely what duty compels; no more, and, I vow, by no means less.”

“He did what?”

“Asked me to untie his skis, sir. Hence: the scene you witness before you.”

“Are you all right, sir?” Herr Voot inquired of Pluck, stooping down to observe him. “Your face is inflamed.”

“I?! I am absolutely well! More than well—positively unbetterable, if you must know! All is as right as can be conceived! I might go so far as to say that civilisation, and my life as one modest cog therein, is nothing less than perfection itself!” screamed Pluck, causing patrons to stream in from other rooms to see about the hullabaloo.

At that, the skis unclicked, and Pluck, hands over his face, broke through the scrum and scurried up the staircase.

When he’d finally managed to get the key into his door and shoved it shut behind him, he threw himself onto his bed and cried angrily into his pillow.

“Beasts!” he sobbed. “Those horrid beasts! To place me in that degrading position, to shower such disdain, to begrudge me my respect! Swine, swine, to a man!”

The room, unlit, was dark in the winter afternoon. Two long curtains hung lifelessly, impotently, over the thick window, grudgingly permitting the barest mucous lustre of light to enter and hover, bemusedly, over the trembling form. The unseen-to radiator popped and whistled. Huge oak bureaux and armoires watched the pathetic goings-on with no trace of pity, but more than a hint of contempt.

After a time—it might have been minutes, it might have been an hour—I don’t know, and you don’t care—Pluck, the put-upon, rolled onto his back, wormed his forefinger into his vest pocket and fished out a key. Sniffing, he bent down to his travelling-chest and unlocked it. From amongst a series of technical implements of which neither you nor I could make head or tail, he extracted a small, handsomely bound album. He rolled up his left trouser leg—revealing a startlingly pale, hairy shin—rolled down his checked sock, and extricated a smaller key, with which he unlocked the tome. He kicked off his shoes, lay on the bed, flipped through several pages of photographs of obese women on the beach with parasols and nothing on, and proceeded to pleasure himself.

Chapter Two

Somewhat depleted, Pluck descended the stately stairs, buttoning his fly. The lobby was shivering with activity, as families and couples and lonely soloists arrived for the beginnings of their holiday. Casting imperious glances to the left and the right, as nonchalantly as a reaper swishing his scythe from side to side amidst the ingenuous wheat, Pluck waded through them on his way to the calmer environs of the tearoom. There, the final glow the sky would have to offer before evening dribbled, a bit reticently, through the high windows, cascading onto the marble floor, pooling on the glass of the tables, bubbling across the prim brown hairpin of a lady, and coagulating on the shoulders of a stout man in a suit sitting with her.

Entirely unbidden, Pluck sat down on the third seat of their table. “Good afternoon, madame and monsieur.”

“Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon.”

“I’m sorry?” he asked, looking to them for an explanation.

The lady looked to the man, who, naturally enough, looked back. The man, then, as the space left by Pluck’s question seemed to demand some sort of answer, turned back to him and explained, “We wished you a good afternoon, as well.”

“Ah! That’s very kind of you both, I must say.”

Properly civilised as they were, the lady and the gentleman sought to hide the most obvious exterior signs of their boredom with their new guest, and sipped their tea, as one.

Referring to that beverage—that very one—Pluck inquired, “What are you drinking?”

“Tea,” explained the man.

“I was inquiring of the lady,” Pluck informed him, a little haughtily.

“I’m drinking tea as well,” she answered, this time for herself.

“Charming, charming! A charming choice!” he congratulated her, and turned round to wave to the waiter, who, more out of duty than predilection, came over.

“Yes, monsieur?”

“I’d like to order.”

“Yes, monsieur?”

“A drink.”

“Which drink, monsieur?”

“Do you have tea?”

“We do, monsieur.”

“Fresh?”

“I’ve just made it, monsieur.”

Pluck, who up till now had not bothered to turn the full force of his face toward the waiter, and whose suspicion was now evidently pricked by something the waiter had said, raised his thin visage, with its unblemished, moonlight-bright skin and inkpot eyes, to him and said:

“Boy, you said you just made it.”

“That’s right, monsieur.”

“The tea.”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

There was a moment without dialogue; the narrative—this narrative—skidded to a halt; as the waiter considered how the question could sensibly be answered.

“The tea is fresh,” threw in the lady, as if it were any business of hers.

“I did not ask you—silence, if you please,” Pluck commanded her out of the side of his mouth, and then, still addressing the waiter: “How am I supposed to know what you meant by ‘just’?”

“Mere moments ago, monsieur,” explained the waiter, at which Pluck slowly closed his eyes and shook his head.

“But your perception, small boy, of a ‘mere moment’ would be, I’m guessing, entirely different to *mine*, or to *this lady’s here*, or even to that of *this gentleman*—if it should come to that.”

The waiter—who had to have been at least twenty—blinked. “I’m sorry, monsieur?”

“Do not be crass, cretin—just bring me a cup of your stale tea and be done with it,” Pluck whined, devastatingly, then turned back to smile at his new friends.

The waiter, whose name, I might as well tell you, was Aloysius, turned with matchless discretion to get the tea. In his thoughts, however, if we were granted the power to peer into them—well, let’s grant ourselves that power, shall we?—his thoughts, I say, ran more along the lines of strangling Pluck’s scrawny, bow-tied neck and smashing his head against the table until such point as both head and table should shatter.

“Now, dear”—Pluck was addressing the lady—“where were we?”

“We were explaining that we were drinking tea in the tearoom,” she reiterated. Her back was straight, her suit ordered, her face round. Pluck’s gaze thus flitted from one part of her to the next, aggravating her and her companion exceedingly.

“I detect that you are a botanist, madame.”

“Not at all.”

“And that your name is ‘Marjorie’.”

“‘Enid’, actually.”

“Hm.” He looked at her, for a long while, even whilst the waiter deposited his tea, inquired if monsieur would like cream or sugar, paused in wait for an answer, and departed when none was forthcoming. Pluck pushed the teacup and saucer away from him without deigning to inspect them, and stared at Enid still. “. . .No, no, I think ‘Marjorie’ is more likely. With a surname that is slightly—Irish?”

“My family is Polish, monsieur.”

“As I thought—Polish, or some other, similarly barbaric, people from the east. And you, sir!” he suddenly thundered, to the extent that his rather feeble, high-registered voice could thunder, towards the man. “You are retired from the navy, I think?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You are in the navy still, then?”

“You couldn’t be further from the truth.” The man threw back his broad shoulders in an attempt to appear good-humoured; his face, wide and redolent of a just-ripe apricot, with a sharp chin which really didn’t belong to the rest of the squishy, somewhat too-spaced-out components, jiggled about under these unnatural demands for forbearance. “Might I ask you your business, monsieur?”

Dextrously ignoring that pointless query, and speaking to them both, now, Pluck announced: “I detect that the two of you met in Nice, flirted in Rome, wed in Brussels and finally consummated your disreputable desires in Greece.”

“That is not so.”

“And although you, sir, reaped satisfaction on your wedding night, madame decidedly did not.”

“That remark is as offensive as it is idiotic.”

“Strong words, monsieur—strong words.” Pluck ended this parry with a knowing smirk. “I always find that when an adversary is forced to lose his temper, he reveals more about

himself than he intends. I detect from your accent that you are Canadian—more specifically—no, no, don't tell me, quiet now—more specifically, somewhere Yukonese way, if I'm not mistaken.”

“You are mistaken, as I hail from Arkansas.”

“Well—I do not wish to be rude, sir, but I might as well come out and tell you to your face that I don't believe you.”

“That is your prerogative—as, I'd obviously been under the false impression, my right to enjoy a tea alone with a lady was mine.”

Pluck, refusing to surrender the throttle his stare had seized on his foe, reached for his teacup in front of him—failing to find it there, and unwilling to look down, his fingers having floundered upon the table for a few seconds, he calmly rested his palms on the linen.

“The fact is, that you are a Yukonese native who is now, for reasons, reasons of your own but reasons which we shall nevertheless soon uncover for ourselves, assuming the role of an Arkansian.”

“‘Arkansawyer’.”

“Whatever. I vow to tear off your garment of lies and expose the small-phallused person beneath to the appreciative gaze of our fellow guests.”

“He clearly has a southern American accent,” the lady, much to Pluck's annoyance, put in. “Even I can tell that.”

“Are you aware, madame, that the penalty for abetting a spy is death?”

“Are you accusing me of espionage, sir?” asked the gentleman, fists describing wonky circles upon the tablecloth.

Pluck rose, with passion, from his seat and spat: “I accuse you of far worse than that, monsieur! I accuse you of neglecting your wife's most elementary erotic needs, and of pandering her to the highest bidder!”

The gentleman jumped up as well. “I am not married, monsieur!”

Pluck clapped together his hands, the resulting burst drawing the attention of the waiter, in triumph at the vindication of his charge. “Do you not see, madame? He has not even the decency to admit your existence!”

“I am not his wife, monsieur.”

“No?”

“No. I am not married.”

Pluck stared at her dubiously. “Forgive me, madame, but I hardly think you recapture the moral high ground by admitting that the two of you indulge your licentiousness out of wedlock.”

“We never met before this afternoon, you idiot!” the man seethed. “The lady was enjoying her tea, and I merely asked to sit down and join her in conversation.”

“Is this so, madame?”

“It's so, monsieur.”

Pluck eyed the man with a passionate, almost lecherous, hatred, then slowly lowered himself to his seat. The man did likewise. Pluck blindly, once again, waved his hands before him in a failing endeavour to locate his tea, then folded one upon the other. In a calmer tone, he resumed: “. . . I must ask myself why two otherwise ordinary-looking persons might wish to cloak their true identities from well-meaning strangers they encounter in a winter resort.”

“No one is cloaking anything, monsieur,” spoke the lady. She looked to the gentleman. “It is quite true that I never met Mister Stoupes before today.”

“‘Mister Stoupes’?!” Pluck enunciated the name with some repugnance.

“I think we might all pay each other the compliment of recomposing and introducing ourselves like civilised human beings.” She patted Pluck's hand, visibly unsettling him. “I'll

go first. My name is Enid Trojczakowski. As I've said, my family is Polish, although I was born and live in England. I am a schoolmistress. Unmarried, and unattached."

Pluck shook his head. "Preposterous," he muttered.

"Nonetheless, true. I'm a spinster, if you want to use the word that was made for it."

Pluck scoffed. "At your age, madame? I hardly think the word yet applies."

"Then I can see that you are either too gentlemanly to allude to a lady's middle-agedness, or too incompetent to gauge one's age."

"The former, obviously," he sniffed.

"And this gentleman," Miss Trojczakowski went on, "whom you were so quick to take up as an enemy, is, as you've heard, Mister Stoupes—I'm sorry, you didn't tell me your Christian name."

"Glen," he said with a smile.

"Mister Glen Stoupes, then, from Arkansas," she finished.

Pluck's eyelashes folded down. He played with the end of his unopened napkin on the table—not the most interesting of games, it has to be said. "You two have certainly learnt your stories with a singular dedication," he mumbled. He pushed back his chair and slowly stood up. "Excuse me—I have some important people to see." He would not look at them. "Thank you for your conversation."

"Not at all," sighed Mister Stoupes.

"Fuck you," spat back Pluck, and he was gone.

Chapter Three

The horrendously galling noise had wholly thwarted Pluck's concentration—he had been studying; cerebrally, aesthetically, you understand, as his bodily ardour had dissipated via manual manipulation, as previously indicated, that afternoon; he had been studying the photographs of those anonymous, liberally endowed beauties of the beach, the parlour, the garden, the fairy glade—and, his attention thus burst, he donned eveningwear and descended the stairs once again into the embracing bosom of his fellow humanity. There was a ballroom in the hotel, and it was there that most of the guests had now assembled. Rolling his eyes, Pluck entered, wincing blatantly at the strains of a, to Pluck's ears, cloying Schubertian lied interpreted with a dearth of imagination by Frau Gilda Hühnerbeinstein, opera diva of local renown and, to Pluck's delight, no little girth.

Pluck found a seat at one of the large round tables and sat down. His appreciation was focused so narrowly on the expansiveness of the singer, however, that he'd neglected to first ascertain the vacancy or lack thereof of said chair, and found himself sat astride the unappreciative thighs of Monsieur Marcel Lapin-Défunt, a French diplomat who was wont to reserve his lap for the dandling of his mistresses.

"Oof!" (So spake Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.)

"Pardon me! But whatever are you doing beneath my bottom, monsieur?!" demanded Pluck in a tone of high offence.

"Get off me, you moron!"

"Pardon me, but would you be so kind as to remove your legs from underneath the seat of my trousers before I summon the porter?!"

Having exhausted diplomacy, Monsieur Lapin-Défunt threw Pluck bodily off him. The singing stopped, and the guests looked as one at the little man with the undersized head sprawling face-down on the carpet. His honour impermissibly tainted, Pluck grabbed hold of a chair to support his attempt to stand and confront his antagonist, but in so doing, pulled out the chair from underneath the slight but exquisite *derrière* of Madame Lapin-Défunt, a cervine beauty who collapsed with Parisian elegance onto the carpet, her wineglass fragmenting across the floor. Pluck returned to the floor, flailing for a handhold, grasping the coattail of Coronel Feosalma, late of the Spanish military, noble in mindset, dignified in deportment and ancient of age, now reduced to a wriggling heap on the carpet.

"I reached out to you for assistance, monsieur, and you failed to help me rise!" shouted Pluck to the coronel. "You have insulted me needlessly!"

"Get away from me before I kill you," the coronel uttered, fumbling to assume a kneeling position and glowering at the interloper.

"I will have you arrested!" cried Pluck from the floor. "The police, manager! Summon the police and have this poltroon removed!"

At that, the coronel seized Pluck in a fearsome lock; the two tumbled about the floor, knocking into patrons' chairs and tripping a passing waiter, the fresh fish from whose sterling silver-plated tray sluiced onto the coiled hair of a duchess.

"What goes on there?!" demanded the redoubtable dame from the stage (i.e., Frau Hühnerbeinstein). "What are you two doing?!"

Pluck sprang up at once. "Nothing, your grace, your majestic paragon of grace in melody and physical build! I pray you accept my limitless pardons on behalf of this ridiculous Italian gentleman who interrupted your performance!"

"I am Spanish, you brainless scum!" hissed the coronel, who drew back his arthritic fist in preparation for delivering a blow. Pluck seized a small dessert knife from the nearest table

and announced, "For you, madame, I shall disembowel the stinking entrails of this swine and hurl them at you like flowers to a diva!"

"That will not be necessary, young man! I am perfectly content for my auditors' viscera to remain within their fleshy confines. Please calm yourself down so that I might resume my song."

Pluck glared at the coronel; bloodlust bloated his eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, ever, ever so slowly, the hand with the dessert knife went down. He threw the knife behind him; it narrowly missed several patrons and clanked against a wall. That hand, that same hand, so recently prepared to annihilate his enemy, now extended towards him, while Pluck magnanimously proposed: "Friends?"

Growling, looking about him as others willed him to accept, caving, then, entirely to the pressure of his peers against his better judgement, the coronel took Pluck's hand, recoiling only a little at its flaccidity.

"Best friends?" Pluck upped the ante.

"I shall not kill you today," promised the coronel.

"But are we best friends?" Pluck persisted.

"No," answered the coronel, with admirable forthrightness.

"But do you want to dine with me sometime, and go for walks, and, and, and, and come to my room and chat about art and nature and politics?"

"No." The coronel found his chair, set it back on its legs, and sat down. Pluck followed him.

"But shall we tour the continent together, and you could show me the wonders of Italy and introduce me to your mummy and daddy, and we could hang out in gentlemen's clubs and laugh over titbits in the papers and play cards, you'd have to teach me first, and read books to each other and—"

"Just, just, shut up, will you?" pleaded the exasperated coronel.

Pluck stood unbendingly beside him; he would not stop. "But we're best friends! We're best friends now! Best friends do things together, they go places together, they unburden themselves of their secrets and—"

The coronel bent his neck and covered his face with his palms. "Just go away from me. I beg you. I beg you."

"Say you'll go for a walk with me tomorrow! Say it! Say it!"

"Please," begged the diva from the stage, "I would like to finish my song now."

Pluck whirled to face her: "A thousand pardons, madame! I must apologise on behalf of my friend, who is going on a refreshing walk with me early tomorrow morning! Isn't that right, ol' pal o' mine?"

"Absolutely not!"

A single tear—a single, lonely tear, lacking as it did even the company of a twin on the other side of Pluck's pale face—trickled down his cheek. "I don't want to be your friend anymore!" he screamed, and, for emphasis, turned his back to the coronel, who had learnt such a mastery of cloaking his feelings in the course of his service that anyone, to look at him, would think that he did not care.

"The poor man!" whispered someone (apropos of Pluck, not the coronel).

"Give him a chance!" said another.

"I hate to see friends quarrel," opined a third.

"Go on the walk!" demanded a gentleman across the room, openly, to the coronel.

"Yes!" seconded another, who stood. "Go on the walk!"

The cry for clemency, for sympathy, for humanity, rolled contagiously around the ballroom, until by the end, almost all of the patrons who had not been insulted by Pluck since his arrival the day before had taken up the call:

“Go on the walk!” “Give him a chance!” “Stay friends!” “Friends are a precious thing!” etc.

The coronel, gritting his teeth and looking about him, recognised a fight he could not win. “All right,” he mumbled.

“What was that? Speak up, you stupid old fool, we can’t hear you!” laughed Pluck, enormously happy.

“I said ‘all right’.”

“What’s that, you meek old idiot? I can’t hear!” Pluck laughed.

“I said ‘all right’!”

“He said he would!” remarked someone.

“He did!”

“He’ll do it!”

The ballroom belched forth a ringing round of applause. Pluck turned to bask therein, crying openly now.

“I love you all!” he shouted, higher-pitched than ever. “You guys! Let me tell you something: you’re just the best bunch of ladies and gents that has ever been assembled, anytime and anywhere, from the birth of the universe till the day it dies, that I promise you!”

The coronel, arms crossed rigidly across his pigeon chest, mumbled something in sailor’s Spanish.

“That’s the spirit!” Pluck slapped him heartily on the back, knocking the coronel forward, chin cracking onto the table, gut slammed by its edge. “By the way, friend, what’s your name?”

The coronel gasped, holding his stomach.

“What’s that?” To the room: “He can’t remember his name!”

All laughed.

“Eyague,” whispered the coronel.

“His name is ‘Eye-Goo!’” Pluck announced, to general applause.

Frau Hühnerbeinstein, too, clapped. “Very well. I love a happy ending as much as anyone—it restores a satisfying balance after an spell of dramatic discord, reaffirms the hegemony of order over chaos, certifies the centrality of man in the cosmic narrative, and justifies the presumption of meaning underpinning our universe—but now, please, monsieur, be seated, that the concert may resume. I dedicate this next song to the both of you—and to the eternal sacrament of perfect friendship.”

Pluck wiped his eyes and, as the diva launched herself into another song, sat down in the lap of Monsieur Lapin-Défunt. The latter threw off the former and grabbed his stick, with which he moved to strike Pluck, only to find his arm restrained by the moderating influence of Madame Lapin-Défunt (given name Petunia). From the floor, Pluck screamed: “Eye-Goo! Eye-Goo! Help me! This savage is trying to kill me!”

The coronel remaining in his seat, and the music halted once again, Herr Voot, the hotel manager, desisting from the violin with which he had been accompanying the diva, ordered the waiter to find the unfortunate fellow an empty seat. With an efficient briskness for which that *métier* is renowned, the waiter had Pluck, in seconds, wedged between a dainty Scottish horsebreeder and the spoilt adolescent son of an Iberian burgher. From that constricted vantage, one knee over the other, shoulders scrunched forward till they practically fused, Pluck watched, and, a little, listened to, Frau Hühnerbeinstein. It would not be incorrect to report that he was salivating. As the ennobling tones soared forth from her golden larynx, Frau Hühnerbeinstein’s eyes, surveying the room, alighted, sparrow-like, on the panting Pluck. Her eyes then, naturally, fluttered away in disgust, but not before Pluck had allowed a serviette to sail, for propriety’s sake, down upon his protruding lap. It was delightful here, Pluck ruminated, nestled amongst his many friends, marinating in the warmth of the fireplace

that was a head taller than he, the constellation of chandeliers scintillating with trickling rivulets of light reflected from the hearth, then irradiating it back like a many-legged curtain of gold depending softly upon the people. Then the song finished, and everyone clapped, and Pluck, aroused with emotion, threw, he knew not why, his empty wineglass across the room at Monsieur Lapin-Défunt.

The latter rose at once to assault him, shouting something insensible about the demands of honour and the necessity of Pluck's violent death, but his wife and an assortment of tactful members of the audience calmed him down.

The performance finished, more drinks were served, and Pluck took the opportunity to wander about the ballroom. He searched for his friend Eyague, but he had disappeared. "He must be searching for me," thought Pluck, "and we are, funnily enough, missing each other!" He passed by that cad Stoupes, who was in a seat next to Enid. Why she would tolerate that ridiculous guttersnipe was more than he, even he, with all his powers of fathoming, could fathom. He stopped for a moment and, peering through the vase-shaped space between two gossiping gentlemen, watched them: Stoupes, perspiring offensively down the back of his neck, smirking his smarmy smirk, leaning in towards Enid, easily twice his age, turning away from him her thin, veined, ropey neck. He placed a hand on one of her bare, flabby arms, and she pulled it away. She stood up; Pluck noticed that her breast, evidently unsupported beneath her hanging, toga-like ballgown, sagged irrecoverably. Such a sight spiked Pluck's sensitive soul, so that for a few seconds he reflected on his own mortality, before a large lady in a pea green dress passed by him and spring blossomed back into his consciousness, life reminded him of its abiding existence, and an infinitude of possibilities stretched out before him like a prairieful of deer stretched out before a cougar.

He swerved through the guests to Herr Voot's table and crouched down next to a half-slumbering man in a wig who sat to the manager's left.

"Excuse me, monsieur, but I have important news."

The man in the wig turned his head. He had an illness, of some sort, Pluck decided, though he couldn't diagnose it precisely and, in truth, did not care. The man raised his watery, long-suffering eyes to Pluck's charcoal ones.

"Nothing is important, anymore," the man opined in muted tones, and with that, lowered his head and closed his eyes once more.

"Buck up, friend, won't you?" urged Pluck. "This blessed world of ours is simply chock-full of unpredictable wonders round each and every corner! Do you hear me? Chock-full!"

"Leave me be." And the gentleman was so still that Pluck nearly thought he had died.

"Do you have a grown daughter, sir? Or perhaps a sister? Or friend far away, in such jeopardy that her only saviour in time of lament would be yourself?"

The man said nothing.

"The reason I ask," Pluck continued, "is because you have a telegram in the lobby of a most urgent nature."

"Have them bring it here."

"In normal, civilised circumstances, monsieur, that is exactly what I would have them do, but, I am afraid to inform monsieur, there has been a mix-up of the most scandalous nature—"

"I would just as soon not be disturbed. My sole extant female relative is my sister-in-law—and she can go hang." This outburst was followed by a snore.

Not to be put off, Pluck shuffled over to the gentleman in the chair to the manager's right. This man had the build of a champion sportsman and a thick set of whiskers of equally impressive proportions. "Excuse me, monsieur."

The man was just finishing a joke he was sharing with Voot: "—a bell on her bottom! A-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! D'ya get it?"

The manager laughed with a practised chuckle of such diplomacy that one could never hope to discern whether it was indicative of legitimate mirth, a decorous counterfeit thereof crafted to conceal an aloof dearth of amusement, or a semblance of counterfeit mirth designed to cloak the earnest mirth hiding beneath it which would appear untoward to onlookers of a certain bent. Meanwhile, Pluck had crouched down next to the brawny gent and now said to him:

“Excuse me, monsieur, but I have important news.”

The man’s beard turned towards him. “Yes? What is the news, then, I pray you, little man?”

“Sir, you have a telegram in the lobby of a most urgent nature.”

“I do? Well have them bring it in, then. What’s the problem?”

“In normal, civilised circumstances, monsieur, that is exactly what I would have them do, but, I am afraid to inform monsieur, there has been a mix-up of the most scandalous nature—”

“What kind of a mix-up? What are you blathering about, sir?”

“Monsieur—” He whispered, now. “You must pardon the indelicacy of my having to relate this, monsieur, but I found myself in the lobby, myself, just a moment ago, monsieur, and, monsieur, try as I did to interfere, monsieur, I could not prevent it. Monsieur.”

“Prevent what?”

“I simply could not prevent it.”

“Prevent what, for heaven’s sake?!”

“The porter Mifkin from reading it aloud to the guests and colleagues about him.”

“He what?!”

“I must say that he read it with a singular relish, appending humorous observations here and there, with a brazen disregard for the intimate nature of the contents of the note, I might add, monsieur.”

The reader might well imagine the violent stupefaction with which the wronged gentleman received this news. I know I can.

“‘Intimate nature’?!” The man leapt to his feet, as they say, with all the haste we would expect from one so offended.

“I assure you, monsieur, that *I*, following such ignominious revelations, will still endeavour to view your lordship with every respect which is your due; but, the world being what it is, and the contagion of scandal being what *it* is, I need hardly tell you that most of your other acquaintances will not.”

“Thank you, monsieur!” The man’s eyes flashed with outrage and a thirst for vengeance of a most honourable order. “I will not forget this courtesy.”

Pluck bowed—“At your service, monsieur”—and the gentleman stomped off. Pluck sat down in the vacant chair and pulled Herr Voot by his shoulder to attend to him. “Monsieur manager, I must discuss with you a most delicate matter.”

“Is the matter in question your feud with the French gentleman, or your love affair with the Spanish gentleman, monsieur?” retorted Voot.

“Neither, monsieur, though I thank you for remembering me. I am afraid the matter concerns a most disreputable deed perpetrated by one of your patrons upon another.”

The manager crossed his arms and his legs and looked Pluck over. Pluck returned the compliment. Looked at one way, Herr Voot had a most uninteresting face, in that it contained two eyes, a nose, a mouth, and all the rest of which most any other specimen of the species might equally boast. In that respect, there was nothing onto which the inquisitive gaze of a born connoisseur of the endless permutations of humanity like Pluck might latch. Viewed another way, however, the face in question could be said to harbour a few tantalising peculiarities: his eyebrows were straight and black and thin, and looked drawn-on, and

mirrored the two strokes of his moustache exactly; his eyes disclosed the almost animal, pre-linguistic sadness of a puppy, loose in the rain outside the shack wherein its owner, unbeknownst to and yet, in some way, divined by the creature, has died; one eye, what's more, was afforded a sheen from a large, foggy monocle uncomfortably clasped between eyebrow and cheek; his nose, originating at the source between his eyes like an average nose, distinguished itself by tapering in its southward progression to a tip against which, it appeared, one might sharpen one's penknife; and finally, his lipless dash of a chin betrayed no more width than did his eyebrows. In summary, looking back over this paragraph, I must revert to my initial impression: it was a face not worth describing.

"Indeed?" rejoined Voot.

"Indeed," affirmed Pluck. "Do you wish to hear it, or shall we remain seated here silently observing each other's faces?"

"By all means, monsieur," sighed the manager, now looking to his drink, now drinking it. "I pride myself on my fleet-footedness in undoing such disreputable deeds as the one to which you refer."

"Then I shall continue," continued Pluck, appeased. "I regret to inform you that a Mister Glen Stoupes of Canada insulted a lady in the tearoom this afternoon—"

"Indeed?"

"Indeed, then threatened to inflict bodily harm on myself—"

"Your name, sir?"

"Mister Pluck—"

"Mister Pluck."

"—when I sought to intervene."

"Might you provide me with some details of the insult, monsieur?"

"With every pleasure, monsieur: it consisted, I am afraid, in an open attack on the lady's chastity, Herr Manager."

"I see."

"He implied," Pluck continued, far beyond the bounds of necessity, "that the gentlemen who had enjoyed the fragrant delights of her vagina were manifold."

Voot closed his eyes and nodded with encouraging resolution. "It would sound most serious, monsieur, and I thank you for, in this instance, shrugging off tact and reporting it to me in this gratuitous manner instead."

Pluck bowed with all the forcefulness honour demanded, while still seated, but, given the close proximity of the interlocutors, his pasty forehead struck and dislodged the manager's monocle so that it lacerated several sections of skin around the eye. Voot emitted a short exclamation of more air than content, followed by a most unmanful shriek, which understandably drew the attention of the guests in the vicinity. Humans being a naturally curious lot, they turned in the direction of the yelp in order to ascertain the motivation for its utterance; you or I would do the same.

Herr Voot's poor chair tumbled to the floor while its recent occupant jumped up and danced about, hands to his eye, blood spurting in several directions. Pluck, gentle creature that he was, could not stand the sight of blood, any more than he could any other bodily fluid, very much including his own, and so shielded his (Pluck's) eye and turned away. A waiter or two—Pluck didn't note the number—snapped open napkins and rushed to their manager's aid.

"You disgusting slob," Pluck maligned Herr Voot, loudly, over his shoulder. "If you had the slightest sense of shame, you would resign your position at once and venture out to drown yourself in the nearest pond."

Pluck's exhortation went largely unheard by those around them, preoccupied as they were with the blood-geysering supervisor of the establishment. They sat Voot down,

stemmed the gushing-away of his vital life-force and whispered sweet, soothing words in his ear, like an amorous lover pledging a gaudy wedding, with no intent to make good, for the immediate prospect of violating his sweetheart's armoured maidenhood. Pluck, for his part, was surpassingly irritated by the lack of attention the manager was devoting to the improprieties with which Pluck had so lately acquainted him. "Pardon, pardon, monsieur, monsieur, madame," Pluck muttered, pushing his way through the throng to Herr Voot. "Herr Manager, I really must insist that you see to my complaint at once! If you could just see to divesting yourself of this rather shameful, solipsistic fixation on your eye, we might get to the bottom of this whole affair!"

A waiter attending to the manager turned round to glare at Pluck. "Shall I eject him from the premises, sir?" he asked Voot. "I would dearly love to do so."

"Just you try, boy, and I will complain to the manager forthwith!" Pluck shrieked, his lone extended finger from his quavering fist pointing, for some reason, to the ceiling.

Herr Voot waved his attendants aside and, under his own power, rose, shakily, from his seat. He covered his right eye with a scarlet-stained serviette, and fixed his remaining ocular apparatus on Pluck. "Lead the way, then, monsieur. I am anxious to discover the veracity of your report of a crisis the like of which has never engulfed the hotel in all my years of service."

Pluck, never too conversant with sarcasm, felt himself vindicated. With a flourish of reasserted superiority, he shoved aside the waiters, took the manager's hand (small, thin, bony, cold) in his, patted it affectionately, and drew him along as he trotted over to the table where Stoupes and Enid had been sitting. They were gone.

"Fled!" Pluck screamed. "Or, should I say, 'kidnapped'!"

His outburst excited, once again, the attention of everyone in the room, including Mister Stoupes and Miss Trojczakowski, who were standing a few feet away by the wall under a large, lush oil painting depicting the Lord of Coucy uncoupling Owain from his testicles at Fraubrunnen. Their presence (Stoupes and Enid's, not the testicles') was not lost on our Pluck, who wasted no time in dragging the manager over to where they stood. Pluck was surprised to see that Stoupes did not cut and run for it at their approach, but there it was: too stupid to save his own skin, when the horsemen of justice bore down.

"This, Herr Manager, is the blackguard of whom I have reported." Lest there should be any ambiguity, Pluck supplemented his accusation with a finger pointed straight into Stoupes' nose. Stoupes, with inexplicable calmness, batted Pluck's finger away.

"Do you see?!" Pluck fairly danced about over the affront to his honour. "The brute strikes me! The brute seeks to wound me!"

"What's this all about, if you please, manager?" inquired Enid, wholly, to Pluck's mind, without purpose.

"I think it would be best if the four of us went to my office to discuss Mister Pluck's accusations," suggested Herr Voot.

"What do you mean, 'four'?!" queried Pluck in outrage.

"He means the four of us," repeated Stoupes.

Pluck looked at him as if he were looking at an idiot.

"You, Mister Stoupes, the manager and myself," Enid explained.

Refusing to take even her word for it, Pluck quickly counted off each of them on his fingers, then, grudgingly, nodded in acquiescence. To Voot: "You may proceed."

The happy group strolled through the ballroom, then out to the lobby, past Mifkin, flattened on the floor, crying up protests of innocence to the muscular, fist-clenched gentleman towering over him, to the right, a sorry scene to which Voot, napkin to eye, was thus oblivious, and into the manager's office.

“Please sit down,” he invited, and took a seat. Mister Stoupes sat in an armchair, and Miss Trojczakowski on a settee, while Pluck remained standing, looking about the room, admiring this and that.

“Enchanting baubles you’ve got here, *mon ami*,” Pluck appraised. “Wherever did you find them?”

“Could we get to the business at hand?” asked Stoupes.

Pluck slowly turned on him a contemptuous eye. “The words of a half-brained philistine, or, put more simply, a damned heathen.” Then, to the manager: “Note that down, if you please.”

“I am not recording our conversation,” Herr Voot informed him.

Pluck turned to him in surprise. “Then who is? Surely not one of those witless savages you’ve got for employees. Perhaps you wish us to call that idiot child from the tearoom? Perhaps he’s learning to write—in kindergarten!” He chuckled, and turned to Enid for support. She gave him a polite smirk, in thrall to the dictates of etiquette in this as in all things, then turned back to the manager.

Herr Voot addressed Stoupes: “This gentleman contends that you insulted this lady’s innocence.”

While Stoupes scoffed, Pluck stole a glimpse at Enid’s lolling breast, and was forced to stifle, once more, an intimation of his own inevitable death. He shuddered, and resumed listening.

“The man’s an idiot,” Stoupes explained. “Pay no attention to him.”

“I disagree, vehemently!” shouted Pluck, so loudly, and at so high a pitch, in that little room, that the other three occupants had to cover their ears; in Voot’s case, necessitating the relinquishment of his napkin and its subsequent drop from his eye, revealing the ring of crimson gashes in its full horror. “Wait!” continued Pluck, in a more moderate tone, turning to Stoupes—“Which man are you calling an idiot?”

“You, of course,” Stoupes elucidated.

“Then I disagree!” Pluck shouted once again. “Vehemently!”

Enid, one hand still over an ear, rose from the sofa, walked over to the manager, who was trembling like a lissom sapling in a gale, and stroked his hair. “Are you well, sir?”

Herr Voot rushed to cover his wound with the napkin, then, with his remaining eye, peered up at her in gratitude. “It’s my nerves, you see, madame. They’re as fragile as spiders’ legs between the thumb and forefinger of a cruel schoolboy at the best of times. May I appeal to your decency to attest, with due decorum, to the events in question in the tearoom?”

“Certainly.” She sat on his desk and stroked his hand, whilst indicating each of the men across from her in turn. “Mister Stoupes, a harmless gentleman whom I had never met, endeavoured to keep me company this afternoon. We drank tea and spoke of art and of world events.”

“Was your—forgive me, madame, for the indelicacy, but a charge has been made. . .”

“It’s all right. Go ahead.”

“Was your—chastity—ever called into question by Mister Stoupes?”

“Certainly not. Why ever should you think such a thing?”

Voot looked to Pluck. Pluck looked to his shoes—not that there was anything so very intriguing to be found there.

Of Stoupes, the manager asked: “And sir, did you threaten to inflict bodily harm on Mister Pluck?”

“No, though he spoke to me in very ungentlemanly language, and as much as accused me of being a spy, so I feel I would have had every right to have.”

“That’s exactly what a spy would say,” muttered Pluck.

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