Lo, the Poor Peacock! F. Scott Fitzgerald

“Lo, the Poor Peacock!” was written in Baltimore early in 1935. After it was declined by The Saturday Evening Post and Ladies' Home Journal, Harold Ober withdrew it. In 1971 Esquire published this story in a version abridged and revised by one of the magazine's editors. The text printed here is the story Fitzgerald wrote in 1935.

At this time, Fitzgerald was living at 1307 Park Avenue with Scottie, while Zelda was at Sheppard Pratt Hospital. With his magazine earnings shrinking, money became a constant anxiety; and he was compelled to pawn the silver—a detail included in “Peacock” (the Supreme Court bowl had been a wedding present from the Associate Justices of the Alabama Supreme Court, on which Zelda's father, Anthony Sayre, served for many years). Fitzgerald's Ledger entry for February 1935 reads: “Wrote story about Peacocks. Very sick. Debts terrible. Left for Tryon Sun 3rd. Oak Hall. Went on wagon for all liquor + alcohol on Thursday 7th (or Wed. 6th at 8.30 P.M)…”

Lo, the Poor Peacock!

I

Miss McCrary put the leather cover over the typewriter. Since it was the last time, Jason came over and helped her into her coat, rather to her embarrassment.

“Mr. Davis, remember if anything comes up that I didn't cover on the memorandum, just you telephone. The letters are off; the files are straight. They'll call for the typewriter on Monday.”

“You've been very nice.”

“Oh, don't mention it. It's been a pleasure. I'm only sorry—”

Jason murmured the current shibboleth: “If times pick up—”

A moment after her departure her face reappeared in the doorway.

“Give my love to the little girl. And I hope Mrs. Davis is better.”

At once it was lonely in the office. Not because of Miss McCrary's physical absence—her presence often intruded on him—but because she was gone for good. Putting on his coat Jason looked at the final memorandum—it contained nothing that need be done today—or in three days. It was nice to have a cleared desk, but he remembered days when business was so active, so pulsating that he telephoned instructions from railroad trains, radiographed from shipboard.

At home he found Jo and two other little girls playing Greta Garbo in the living room. Jo was so happy and ridiculous, so clownish with the childish smudge of rouge and mascara, that he decided to wait till after luncheon to introduce the tragedy.

Passing through the pantry he took a slant-eyed glance at the little girls still in masquerade, realizing that presently he would have to deflate one balloon of imagination. The child who was playing Mae West—to the extent of saying ‘Come up and see me sometime’—admitted that she had never been permitted to see Mae West on the screen; she had been promised that privilege when she was fourteen.

Jason had been old enough for the war; he was thirty-eight. He wore a salt-and-pepper mustache; he was of middle height and well-made within the first ready-made suit he had ever owned.

Jo came close and demanded in quick French:

“Can I have these girls for lunch?”

“Pas aujourd 'hui.”

“Bien.”

But she had to be told now. He didn't want to give her bad news in the evening, when she was tired.

After luncheon when the maid had withdrawn, he said:

“I want to talk, now, about a serious matter.”

At the seriousness of his tone her eyes left a lingering crumb.

“It's about school,” he said.

“About school?”

He plunged into his thesis.

“There've been hospital bills and not much business. I've figured out a budget—You know what that is: It's how much you've got, placed against how much you can spend. On clothes and food and education and so forth. Miss McCrary helped me figure it out before she left.”

“Has she left? Why?”

“Her mother's been sick and she felt she ought to stay home and take care of her. And now, Jo, the thing that hits the budget hardest is school.”

Without quite comprehending what was coming, Jo's face had begun to share the unhappiness of her father's.

“It's an expensive school with the extras and all—one of the most expensive day schools in the East.”

He struggled to his point, with the hurt that was coming to her germinating in his own throat.

“It doesn't seem we can afford it any more this year.”

Still Jo did not quite understand, but there was a hush in the dining room.

“You mean I can't go to school this term?” she asked, finally.

“Oh, you'll go to school. But not Tunstall.”

“Then I don't go to Tunstall Monday,” she said in a flat voice. “Where will I go?”

“You'll take your second term at public school. They're very good now. Mama never went to anything but a public school.”

“Daddy!” Her voice, comprehending at last, was shocked.

“We mustn't make a mountain out of a mole-hill. After this year you can probably go

back and finish at Tunstall—"

"But Daddy! Tunstall's supposed to be the best. And you said this term you were satisfied with my marks—"

"That hasn't anything to do with it. There are three of us, Jo, and we've got to consider all three. We've lost a great deal of money. There simply isn't enough to send you."

Two advance tears passed the frontier of her eyes, and navigated the cheeks.

Unable to endure her grief, he spoke on automatically:

"Which is best—spend too much and get into debt—or draw in our horns for a while?"

Still she wept silently. All the way to the hospital where they were paying their weekly visit she dripped involuntary tears.

Jason had undoubtedly spoiled her. For ten years the Davis household had lived lavishly in Paris; thence he had journeyed from Stockholm to Istamboul, placing American capital in many enterprises. It had been a magnificent enterprise—while it had lasted. They inhabited a fine house on the Avenue Kleber, or else a villa at Beaulieu. There was an English Nanny, and then a governess, who imbued Jo with a sense of her father's surpassing power. She was brought up with the same expensive simplicity as the children she played with in the Champs Elysees. Like them, she accepted the idea that luxury of life was simply a matter of growing up to it—the right to precedence, huge motors, speed boats, boxes at opera or ballet; Jo had early got into the habit of secretly giving away most of the surplus of presents with which she was inundated.

Two years ago the change began. Her mother's health failed, and her father ceased to be any longer a mystery man, just back from Italy with a family of Lenci dolls for her. But she was young and adjustable and fitted into the life at Tunstall school, not realizing how much she loved the old life. Jo tried honestly to love the new life too, because she loved things and people and she was prepared to like the still newer change. But it took a little while because of the fact that she loved, that she was built to love, to love deeply and forever.

When they reached the hospital Jason said:

"Don't tell mother about school. She might notice that it's hit you rather hard, and make her unhappy. When you get—sort of used to it we'll tell her."

"I won't say anything."

They followed a tiled passage they both knew to an open door.

"Can we come in?"

"Can you?"

Together husband and daughter embraced her, almost jealously, from either side of the bed. With a deep quiet, their arms and necks strained together.

Annie Lee's eyes filled with tears.

"Sit down. Have chairs, you all. Miss Carson, we need another chair."

They had scarcely noticed the nurse's presence.

“Now tell me everything. Have some chocolates. Aunt Vi sent them. She can't remember what I can and can't eat.”

Her face, ivory cold in winter, stung to a gentle wild rose in spring, then in summer pale as the white key of a piano, seldom changed. Only the doctors and Jason knew how ill she was.

“All's well,” he said. “We keep the house going.”

“How about you, Jo? How's school? Did you pass your exams?”

“Of course, Mama.”

“Good marks, much better than last year,” Jason added.

“How about the play?” Annie Lee pursued innocently. “Are you still going to be Titania?”

“I don't know, Mama.”

Jason switched the subject to ‘the farm,’ a remnant of a once extensive property of Annie Lee's.

“I'd sell it if we could. I can't see how your mother ever made it pay.”

“She did though. Right up to the day of her death.”

“It was the sausage. And there doesn't seem to be a market for it any more.”

The nurse warned them that time was up. As if to save the precious minutes Annie Lee thrust out a white hand to each.

As they got into the car, Jo asked:

“Daddy, what happened to our money?”

Well—better tell her than to have her brood about it.

“It's complicated. The Europeans couldn't pay interest on what we lent them. You know interest?”

“Of course. We had it in the Second Main.”

“My job was to judge whether a business showed promise, and if I thought so we loaned them money. When bad times came and they couldn't pay, we wouldn't loan any more. So my job was played out and we came home.”

He went on to say that the money he had invested in the venture—oh, many thousands, oh, never mind how much, Jo—and now all that money was ‘tied up.’

Under the aegis of the old shot tower they slowed by a garage to fill the tank.

“Why do you like to stop at this station, Daddy? Beside that ugly old chimney over there?”

“That's not a chimney. Don't you know what it is? During the Revolution they had to drop lead down to make the bullets to fire at the British. This is a Historical

Monument.”

…They rounded the corner of the Confederate dead. Jo spoke again suddenly:

“Americans have a hard time, don't they, Daddy? Always fights about nothing.”

“Oh well, we're a fighting race. That's what brought us here in the first place.”

“But it's not happy—like in Europe.”

“They have their troubles. Anyhow you were just a child and all shielded.” And he added as they stopped in front of their house, “What of it?”

“Mummy has heart trouble, and you lost your money, and—”

“For heaven's sake don't get sorry for yourself!” he said gruffly. “That spoils people for good. We have a nice house, at least.” He felt a pang at knowing that they were going to have to give it up, but he did not want to put too much upon her in one day.

But in the hall Jo was still absorbed in her inner story.

“Daddy, we're like the characters in Little Orphan Annie, only we haven't got that dog that says Arp all the time. I never heard a dog say Arp did you? They always have dogs in the funny papers now that say ‘Arp’ or ‘Woof,’ and I never heard a dog say either.”

He was relieved at the turn the conversation had taken.

“I only like the Gumps. Except when I feel mean I like Dick Tracy and X-9.”

Jo sighed as she started to her room.

“Nothing seems so bad—when you only have to read about it,” she said ruefully.

II

Almost before Jo was adjusted to public school the news broke to her of their impending move. It was a far cry from the spacious house with the mutual, free-rolling lawns of the new suburbs, to the little apartment. Into which the big sofa and the big bed simply wouldn't go and had to repose instead at storage, along with many other things. Jo derived a melancholy consolation from being allowed to act as interior decorator. With some difficulty her father restrained his hilarity.

“I think it's beautiful, Baby.”

“Oh, I know you don't. But Daddy, I thought I'd get tinfoil at the five-and-ten and make the whole room silver, like a room in the House Beautiful. But it rumpled. And now it won't come off—no matter what I do makes it worse!”

During Washington's Birthday vacation she repainted her furniture. The man from the Cleaning and Dyeing Company looked aghast at the rug he was expected to restore. And that evening at dancing school mothers warned their children away from the violent rashes on her arms—and were appalled—no understatement is possible—by the clearly leprous quality of the green or purple patches that glared like menacing eyes—dull and sinister eyes—from her hair. There had been nothing to do about it; hair is not washed in tears. The patches remained, remained indeed for weeks. After a fortnight they took on a not unattractive hue—attractive, that is to say, to anyone but Jo—of the roofs of many European villages washed down by an avalanche.

And mingled. Thoroughly mingled.

The catastrophe discouraged Jo so much that she no longer wanted to go to the Beacon's Barn dancing class.

Jason argued for it—it was not expensive.

“But there's no use,” she said, “—now I don't go to Tunstall any more. They have secrets. I like a lot of people at school now.”

“You'd better,” her father said.

“Why do you say I'd better?”

In their new isolation these two talked and fought against each other like adults, almost the old sempiternal dispute of man and wife.

Jason hated that it should be that way, hated her to see him in moments of discouragement.

“Let's go out to the farm,” he said one Saturday at breakfast. “You've never been there.”

“Can we afford to run the car?”

“Jo, can't you forget for a minute that I'm poor? I've explained; in the textile business there're only three or four accounts that pay commissions. That's like interest. You said you understood that.”

“Yes.”

“And the brokers who have them are naturally hanging on— they had them before I came here. As long as I have to sell second-class merchandise to—”

“Let's forget it and like the ride.”

“It certainly can go fast, Daddy. Can we really afford to run it?”

“It's cheaper running fast. I want to get there before they finish making the first batch of sausage.”

It was seventy miles between fields of frosty rubble, between the ever-dividing purple shoulders of the Appalachians, between villages he had never wanted to ask the names of, so much did he cherish the image of them in his heart…

But Jo's heart was still in France. She was less regarding than thinking.

“Daddy—why couldn't we just make a lot of money out of the farm? Like grandmother did. And just live on that. And get rich.”

“But there isn't any farm any more, I tell you. There's just a—— just a large pig-sty!”

He retreated from his coarseness as he saw her face contract.

“It isn't quite all that, Baby. Young Seneca does a little truck farming—”

“Who's Young Seneca?”

“There was an Old Seneca and now there's a Young Seneca—”

“When it was a big farm how big was it, Daddy?”

“As far as you can see.”

“Far as the mountains?”

“Not quite.”

“It was a big farm, wasn't it?”

“It was good and big—even for these parts,” he answered, falling into the vernacular.

After a time Jo asked:

“How do they make the sausage, Daddy?”

“I kind of forget. I think—let's see—I think the formula is sixteen pounds of lean meat and sixteen of fat meat. And then they grind it all together. Then they knead in the seasoning—nine tablespoons of salt, nine pepper, nine sage—”

“Why nine?”

“That's what your grandmother did.”

——Jason had fed Jo's insatiable curiosity with as much as he remembered of the process as they turned into the washed-out lane that led to the farm.

Young Seneca, plunged into work, hurried over to greet them.

“How goes?” Jason asked.

“Just startin', Mr. Davis. We butchered last night. Then a couple of boys thought they had a right to sleep all day. Have I got to pay 'em for that time? They just keep the dogs off.”

“The dogs?” Jo demanded.

He acknowledged her presence.

“That's right, Missy. Dogs down here are up to anything. We say: ‘It's a poor dog that can't keep his own self.’”

Getting out of the car they walked toward the smokehouse.

“We pay those hands well,” Jason said. “They still get the chitlings and cracklings and hogs' heads?”

“They gets the regular, Mr. Davis. Even them ditchers work right hard. You take now Aunt Rose that worked for your mother-and-law—she's been kneadin' that seasoning till her arms like to fall off.”

The Negress in question greeted them cheerfully.

“Day! Mr. Davis. Day! Young lady.”

She left her job momentarily to inspect the child, wiping her hands of the sharp spices on a big old kitchen towel.

“And don't you look like your mother did?”

Jo wandered into the smokehouse. She passed barrels of flour, salt, lard—of brown sugar, of cut sugar, of sugar granulated. Coming out she ran into a colored girl with a bucket of milk on her head.

“I'm sorry.”

Without losing a bit of her balance the young woman laughed hilariously.

“Don't need to be sorry. There's chits been threatnin' to push me down three years, and none ov'em ever do it.”

…Jo emerged from the smokehouse to find her father in argument with Young Seneca, who broke off from time to time to call instructions to his helpers.

“That there's a flour sifter you're using, Aunt Jinnie. You ought to use a cornmeal sifter for getting out them sage stems.”

Jo's interest was divided between the sausage grinding and her father's conversation with Young Seneca.

“We're not making a cheap sausage and listen to this.”

He took a letter from his pocket and read aloud: “‘We cannot undertake to distribute your product any longer because of the cancellations.’ Now I can't believe that's just hard times. This used to be the best-known stuff of its kind in the East. It's fallen off in quality. So where's your pride, man? They didn't use to be able to keep up with the orders. Something's missing.”

“Sure I don't know what it is, Mr. Davis.”

When they started back a hickory fire flamed against the white sycamores and it was cold.

“Daddy, if the farm was mine I'd try to find out what's the matter about the sausage.”

Every day Jo lost a little faith in her father. Father had been “wonderful” once, and she went on, because she had been correctly tuned to the idea that duty is everything. She had been early made to put her back and wrists into that great realization—work isn't all enthusiasm, though that is an essential part of it—in the long stress and strain of life it is more often what one doesn't want to do any longer.

III

At high school Jo was behind in some subjects but in language classes her only difficulty was to bring her accent down to the level of the rest; her weak spot was Ancient History, which she had never studied—her remark that Julius Caesar was King of Egypt, remembered vaguely from a quick reading of Anthony and Cleopatra, became a teacher's legend in the school. She made only a few friends at school; she was at the age of existing largely in her imagination.

On Jason's part it was no help in the dull late winter to know that Jo was losing

faith in him. Her right to security and to special privilege as well—this, that was as much a part of her as her sense of responsibility—made a friction between them. But something was gone—Jo's respect for the all-wise, all-just, all-providing.

He tried to keep up his morale with exercise, and with ceaseless pursuit of better textile accounts. His thin stream of commission money scarcely sufficed to keep his head above water. With one of the big ones he would be on safe ground; for he was favorably known here. Well disposed wholesalers tried to slant in his direction, but they were prevented by a class of merchandise they did not care to carry.

There came the black day when he cracked—the blue black, the purple black, the green black of those unused to it. In the morning the grocer's wife came; she said loud in the living room that she and her husband did not care to carry the account any longer.

“Be quiet!” Jason warned her. “Wait till the little girl gets off to school.”

“Your little girl! What about mine. One hundred ten dollar—”

Jo's feet sounded on the stairs.

“Morning Daddy. Oh! Morning Mrs. Deshhacker.”

“Good morning.”

Temporarily, Jo's imperturbability disarmed Mrs. Deshhacker, but after she had gone into the dining room, she delivered her ultimatum more firmly. Jason could only say:

“I'll try… Middle of next week… Anyhow a partial payment.”

There was the silver: Certain pieces were inviolate—the Supreme Court Bowl, the Lee spoons with the crest of his grandfather—

Jason had seen the sign many times. Mr. Cale would take any security—was most generous, most reliable.

“How do you do, sir?”

With the infallible good manners of the Marylander, even of the humbler denominations, he stood waiting. His venality scarcely showed through his mask.

Jason mumbled something with a shamed face. Mr. Cale was used to that and stopped him.

“You want to raise some money?”

“Yes—on some silver.”

“What kind?”

“Table silver. Some goblets that have been a long time—” He broke off—the indignity was intolerable— “and a coffee set.”

“Well naturally you have to show me.”

“Of course. There may be other things—some furniture. A few pieces—I'll redeem them in a month or so.”

“Oh, I'm sure you will.”

Big chance he will, he added from his own experience…

At the hospital Jason was stopped in the hall and made to sit down by the floor nurse. Doctor Keyster was finishing his rounds and wanted to talk to him before he went into his wife's room.

“About what?”

“He didn't say.”

“She's worse?”

“I don't know, Mr. Davis. He just wants to talk to you—”

She was cleaning thermometers as she talked.

Half an hour later in a little reception room Dr. Keyster spoke his mind.

“She doesn't respond. There's nothing before her but years of rest, that's all I can say—years of rest. We've all got fond of her here but there'd be no service to you in kidding you.”

“She'll never get well?”

“Probably never.”

“You don't think she'll ever be well?” Jason asked again.

“There have been cases—”

……Then the spring was gone out of life, April, May and June. That was all gone.

…April when she came to him like a rill of sweetness. May when she was a hillside. June when they held each other so close that there was nothing more except the lashes flicking on their eyes…

Dr. Keyster said:

“You might as well make up your mind to it, Mr. Davis.”

Going home once more from one of the many pietas to his love, Jason's taxi passed through an agitated meat market; a labor agitator was addressing the crowd; when he saw Jason in his taxi he shifted the burden of his discourse to him.

“Here is one! And here we are! We'll turn them upside down and shake them till the dimes and quarters roll out!”

Jason wondered what would roll out of him. He had just enough to pay the taxi.

Up in his bedroom he felt for the third time the balance of the thirty-eight revolver—life insurance all paid up.

“Help me to kill myself!” he prayed. “No fooling now. Put it in the mouth.”

——The phone rang sharp and he tossed the gun onto the empty twin bed.

A woman's voice said: “Is this Mr. Davis? This is Principal McCutcheon's secretary. Just one moment.”

Then came a man's voice, level and direct.

“This is Mr. McCutcheon at the High School. It's an unfortunate matter, Mr. Davis. We have to ask you to withdraw your daughter Josephine from school.”

Jason's tense breath caught in his throat.

“I thought you'd rather know before she reached home. I tried your office. We're compelled, much against our sensibilities, to expel three of the girls for conduct that can't be condoned. When a pupil falls below the tone of the school the individual must be sacrificed to the good of the majority. I called a committee of teachers, Mr. Davis, and they saw eye-to-eye with me.”

“What was the nature of the offense?”

“That I don't care to go into on the phone, Mr. Davis. I shall be glad to see you by appointment any afternoon except Thursday between two and four. I must add that we were more than surprised to find Josephine linked up to this matter. She's held herself—well, I must say, a little aloof; she hasn't ingratiated herself with her teachers, but—well, there we are.”

“I see,” Jason said dryly.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

Jason reached for the revolver and began taking the cartridges out of the magazine.

——I've got to stick around—a little longer, he thought.

Jo arrived in half an hour, her usually mobile mouth tight and hard. There were dark strips of tears up and down her cheeks.

“Hello.”

“Hello, darling.” He had been waiting for her downstairs; he waited till she had taken off her coat and hat.

“What's it all about anyhow?”

Furiously she turned to him.

“I won't tell you! You can shake me, Daddy! You can beat me!”

“For God's sake—what's this all about? When did I ever beat you?”

“They wanted to this morning because I wouldn't say what they wanted.”

Jo flung herself into a corner of the big couch and wept into it. He walked around the room, concerned and embarrassed.

“I don't want to know, Jo. Whatever you do is all right with me. I trust you, Baby, all the way. I'm not even making any inquiries.”

She turned tired eyes up at him.

“You won't? You promise, word of honor?”

“Yes.”

“I've got an idea, a real hunch. Unless—or say till I get the Gehrbohm account, I have lots of time in the afternoon. Suppose I be your private tutor for awhile. I was pretty good once in Latin and Algebra. For the languages we'll get a reading list from the library.”

She sobbed again deep into the big cushions.

“Oh Baby! Stop that. We're not defeatists, you and me. Take a bath and then we'll get up some dinner.”

When she had gone into her room Jason tried to think of something outside himself. Then he remembered what Annie Lee had said in their short quarter hour this morning.

“I can't understand about the farm—it was all so simple. There was the seasoning—nine tablespoons of salt, then nine of hickory ash, then the pepper and sage. And of course always the tenderloin—”

“Hickory ash?” Jason had exclaimed. “Tenderloin?”

Stirred by his surprise she lifted herself up in bed, so that he had to ease her gently down again. “Don't tell me Young Seneca isn't using tenderloin—isn't putting in the tablespoons of hickory ash?”

——In the living room of the apartment Jason sat down and wrote Young Seneca.

When Jo came downstairs he said, “Take this over to the post office, will you? It's about the farm.”

After examining the address Jo demanded:

“Father—do you mean seriously you're going to teach me?”

“Am I? You bet! Teach you all I know.”

“All right.”

But in the grey dusk he was still bent over the ragged text-book.

“Caesar,” he said over the first text. “It's addressed to the damn Swiss!”

He translated:

“In Switzerland they necked the Gods and the men—”

”What, Daddy?”

“Wait now: In Switzerland they necked the men and then they necked the Gods—This is difficult now—Latin didn't seem like that in my day.”

Jason turned to Jo with exasperation. “Don't they give you sentences to construe? Helvetii qui nec Deos nec homines verebantur—That means quiver I think—magnum dolorem. That means it all ends up very sad. Why did you ask me to translate it in

the first place?”

“I didn't ask you. I knew that part. It means the Helvetians who feared neither Gods nor men came to great grief because they were restrained on all sides by mountains.”

He read again: “Patiebantur quod ex omnibus partibus, and that means a rampart of ten feet,” he cried exultantly across the lamplight.

“Yah! You saw that in a footnote.”

“I did not,” he lied.

“Give me your word of honor?”

“Let's talk about something else.”

“You fancy yourself as a teacher.”

That was the end of the first night's Latin.

Thumbing over the book Jo found her place and read aloud slowly:

“If the government revenue from taxes increased from one billion dollars in 1927 to five hundred billion dollars in 1929, what was the increased percent?”

“Go on,” said Jason.

“Go on yourself, Daddy. You're this wonderful mathematician. And try this one!”

“Let me read it myself:

'If the sum of the reciprocals of two consecutive even numbers is zero. Then the sum of two other consecutive numbers is 11/60. What are the numbers?'”

Jason said, “There's always for the X an unknown quantity. You have to have some system—haven't you?”

“Swell system.”

“Got to start somewhere.” He bent over it again: “If the government revenue increased from five billions in 1927 to—”

He was temporarily at the end of his resources.

“Darling,” he said. “In a week I'll know more about this—”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Time for you to go to bed.”

There was a pregnant silence between them.

“I know.”

She came over to him and pecked briefly at an old baseball scar on his forehead.

VI

To keep the chronicle going one must skip through the days when Annie Lee's farm came to life again—when Young Seneca realized that Mr. Davis actually wanted tenderloin put into the sausage—the day he recalled that an important appendage was nine tablespoons of hickory ash.

Orders for the buckets began to increase. From merely paying for itself, the farm began to dribble a trickle of profit.

VII

Some nights Jason used to go to her bedside and sit. Not tonight, though. He picked up in the living room the copy of Caesar's Gaellic Wars.

The Swiss, who feared neither Gods nor men, suffered…

“Who am I to be afraid?” Jason thought. He who had led eight Ohio country boys to death in a stable in France and come out of it with only the loss of the tip of his left shoulder!

The Swiss who feared neither Gods nor men suffered—

He pulled the lamp closer.

The night wore on in a melange of verbs and participles. Toward eleven the phone rang.

“This is Mr. McCutcheon.”

“Oh, yes.”

“There's a serious injustice been done your daughter.”

It seems that there had been some wild excursion into the boys' locker-room—during which someone was posted as sentry outside. The sentry had run away but Jo was there trying to warn them at the moment when the monitors appeared.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Davis. There isn't much we can do in these cases—except offer our sincere apology.”

“I know.”

The phone put on the voice of Mr. Halklite.

Here it was! The Pan-American Textile account.

“Hello, Mr. Davis! I'm in Philadelphia. We've had some correspondence—I'll be down in your part of the world tomorrow and I thought I'd drop in. Sorry to call so late…”

Breakfast was waiting when, having made a journey to his office and back, Jason went to his bedroom—almost immediately Jo, who had heard him come in, knocked at the door and demanded in alarm:

“What's the matter?”

“I'm just tired. I've been working all night. Say, if you have those girls to lumpshun—” the words seemed extraordinarily hard and long—“then fix up the room afterwards. Very important. Business meeting.”

“I understand, Daddy.”

Holding to the bed-post he swayed precariously. “Whole future depends on this man. Make it nice for him.”

With no more warning he pitched forward across the bed.

VIII

Unexpectedly at eleven o'clock the colored girl admitted Mr. Halklite. On his tour of inspection Mr. Halklite had become, perforce, less and less kind, though he was kindly by nature. Keenness was his valuable business asset—exercising the quality had temporarily become dull—there was the necessity of weeding out the exhausted and the inefficient. Halklite could tell the dead from the living, and that was half of why he had just been elected a vice-president of Pan-American Textile. Only half, though. The other half was because he was kind.

A little girl came into the room.

“Good morning. Is your father in? I think he expected me.”

“Won't you come in? Father's got a cold—he's lying down.”

In Jason's bedroom Jo shook and shook the exhausted body without result. She went back into the living room.

“Daddy'll be getting up presently,” she said. “He's sorry he wasn't dressed to meet you.”

“Oh, that's all right. You're Mr. Davis' little girl?” Mr. Halklite said.

Jo crossed as if casually to the piano bench and turned back to him with sudden decision.

“Mr. Halklite, father's had flu, and the doctor doesn't want him to get up. He's going to try to.”

“Oh, we can't let him!”

“The doctor didn't want him to. But Daddy's like that. If he says he'll do something, he does. Daddy needs a woman to take care of him. And I'm so busy at school—”

“Tell him not to get up,” Halklite repeated.

“I don't even know whether he can.”

“Then tell him it doesn't matter.”

She went to her father's room and presently returned.

“He sent you best regards. He was sorry not to see you.”

Her heart was in agony. Keeping that agony out of her expression was the hardest thing she had ever had to do.

“I'm good and sorry,” Mr. Halklite said. “I wanted to talk to him. How old is your father, young lady?”

“I don't know. I guess he's about thirty-eight.”

“Well a man can be young at thirty-eight,” he protested. “Isn't your father still young?”

“Daddy's young. But he's serious.” She hesitated.

“Go on,” Halklite said. “Tell me about him. I'll leave you to your lessons as soon as I finish my cigarette. But I think you ought to stay out of your father's room while he's ill.”

“Oh, I do.”

“You're fond of your daddy?”

“Yes—everybody is.”

“Does he go around much?”

“Not much—Oh, he does though. He goes out to see Mama once a week. And he goes to walk half an hour when I go to bed. He starts out when I start to bed and then I call down to him when I hear him open the door coming in—pour dire bon soir.”

“You speak French?” She regretted that she had mentioned it, but she admitted, “I grew up in France.”

“So did your daddy, didn't he?”

“Oh no, Daddy's very American. He can't even speak French much, really.”

Halklite stood up, made his decision suddenly, perhaps irrationally.

“You tell your father we want to put our account in his hands. Maybe that'll cheer him up and help him get well. ‘Pan-Am-Tex.’ Can you remember that? He'll understand.”

IX

It was April again and they walked in the zoo.

“It's been a hard year, Jo.”

“I know that, Daddy. But look at the peacocks!”

“This is your education, Jo. It's most of what you'll ever know about life. You'll understand later.”

“I know we've had bad times, Daddy. Everything's better again, isn't it? Look at the peacocks, mon pere. They don't worry.”

“Well, if you insist, let's sit on the bench and stare at them.”

Jo sat silent for a moment. Then she said:

“We were peacocks once, weren't we?”

“What?”

“They probably have sorrows and troubles sometimes, when their tails don't grow out.”

“I guess so. What school do you want to go to next year? You can have your choice.”

“That doesn't seem to matter any more. Look at the peacock— Look! the one that's trying to peck outside the cage. I love him—do you?”

Jason said, “After all, considering everything, it wasn't such a bad year.”

“What?” Jo turned from the cage where she had gone to try, unsuccessfully, to feed the bird a shelled peanut.

“Daddy, let's stop worrying. I thought we stopped months ago. Mother's coming home next week. Maybe some day we'll be three peacocks again.”

Jason came over to the wire.

“I suppose peacocks have their problems.”

“I suppose so. Look, Daddy! I've got this one eating the popcorn.”